

**Writing about Female Oppression: The Social and Political Significance of Tsitsi  
Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions.**

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## **Declaration**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

## **Abstract**

This thesis demonstrates that an African woman writer often faces a number of challenges due to her social and economic situation in many countries, and this has led to writers like Dangarembga adopting unusual literary strategies in an attempt to be heard in the literary arena, as well as in their communities. Most African women are subjects of patriarchal systems and previously were subjects of oppressive colonial systems, which meant that they were faced with sexual discrimination in virtually every aspect of life. For example, African women writers have had to challenge male dominance in the literary arena, and rework sexist and stereotypical representations of African women in literature. They have also had to struggle to have their novels published and receive serious critical attention, as their works have frequently been appropriated and misrepresented by a great deal of Western feminist literary analysis, which tends to construct artificial categories of analysis and ultimately discriminates between “us” and “them” in an imperialistic and often racist manner. In response to this social and literary context, Dangarembga has developed a number of literary strategies which enable her to deliver social and political commentary and challenge the status quo. For instance, she uses the technique of “writing beyond the ending” to critique her main character, Tambu, by narrating the story from the point of view of an experienced self which develops outside the scope of the novel. Because of this technique she is able to draw attention to the inconsistencies, dangers and ironies inherent in the position of many of her characters. She has also created a novel which appears to conform to the convention of a “Bildungsroman”, but then reverses this familiar pattern by demonstrating that the individual is at the mercy of the colonial system without the support and sense of heritage that involvement with their community provides. The novel ultimately demonstrates that it is because of her involvement with the community that Tambu achieves consciousness and emancipation, as opposed to through her individual endeavours. Finally, Dangarembga challenges simplistic and reductive representations of women in Western feminist and other texts, by vividly portraying the multiplicity and variety of her characters’ responses to an oppressive situation, as well as the unique and multifaceted nature of their situation. She strongly rejects the idea that African women are ultimate victims of oppressive social systems, by demonstrating that there are a number of choices and options available to women and that they are

able to influence their situation, even though the circumstances they live in are extremely complex and stressful. This thesis concludes by pointing out the social importance of this kind of text, as it illustrates an alternate mode of behaviour for oppressed women and thus may ultimately contribute towards social and political change. At the same time, writing of this sort provides a vital outlet for many African women writers who experience oppression and silencing as members of patriarchal societies, as well as a way in which to analyse and reinterpret their experiences of oppression in a more constructive manner.

## **Opsomming**

Hierdie tesis demonstreer dat Afrikaanse skryfsters in baie lande dikwels verskeie uitdagings tee kom, as gevolg van hul sosiale en ekonomiese situasies. Om daardie rede het skryfsters soos Tsitsi Dangaremba ongewone literere strategiee aangeneem, as 'n poging om in die literere arena, sowel as in hul eie gemeenskappe gehoor te word. Die meeste Afrikaanse vroue is aan patriargiese sisteme en was voorheen ook aan oppressiewe koloniale sisteme onderdanig, waarin hulle seksuele diskriminasie in amper elke faset van die samelewing tee gekom het. As gevolg hiervan moet Afrikaanse skryfsters manlike dominasie in die literariese arena uitdaag, en seksistiese, stereotipiese uitbeeldings van Afrikaanse vroue in literatuur verander. Hulle sukkel ook om hul boeke te laat druk en om ernstige kritiese aandag te ontvang, omdat hulle werk dikwels deur Westerse feministe literere analiseerders aangeneem en misverteengeword word. Dit skep gewoonlik onnatuurlike kategoriee van ontleding en diskrimineer tussen "ons" en "hulle" in 'n imperialistiese en dikwels rasistiese manier. Dangaremba se antwoord in die sosiale en literere konteks, was om verskeie literariese strategiee te ontwikkel wat haar in staat gestel het om sosiale en politiese kommentaar te lewer wat die "status quo" aanpak. Sy gebruik, by voorbeeld, die tegniek van "skryf verby die einde" om op haar hoofkarakter, Tambu, kritiek te lewer. Hier sien ons hoe sy die storie vertel van 'n ervare self se oogpunt wat buite die tydperk van die storie ontwikkel het. Hierdie tegniek laat haar toe om aandag te trek aan die ongelykhede, gevare en ironie wat bestaan in baie van haar karakters se situasies. Dangaremba het ook 'n boek geskep wat blyk asof dit pas by die model van 'n "Bildungsroman", maar dan sit sy hierdie bekende patroon in tru rat. Sy demonstreer dat die individu aan die koloniale sisteem blootgestel is, sonder die steun en bewussyn van afkoms wat betrokkenheid met die gemeenskap verskaf. Die boek demonstreer uiteindelik dat dit juis haar betrokkenheid met die gemeenskap is, wat Tambu na bewusheid en vryheid lei, en nie haar eie pogings nie. Byvoorbeeld, vat Dangaremba simplistiese en verminderende verteenwoordigings van Afrikaanse vroue in Westerse feministe en ander tekste aan, deur om die veelvoudigheid en verskeidenheid in haar karakters se reagerings teen 'n oppressiewe situasie uit te wys, sowel as die unieke an

veelsigtige natuur van hul situasie. Haar sterk verwerping van die idee dat Afrikaanse vroue helplose lyers van oppressiewe sosiale sisteme is, word gedemonstreer deur haar uitbeelding van die beskikbaarheid van 'n groot verkeidenheid keuses aan haar vroulike karakters, en die baie geleenthede wat hulle het om hul situasies te beïnvloed, al is die omstandighede waarin hulle lewe ontsettend kompleks en moeilik. Laastens, dui hierdie tesis die sosiale belangrikheid van haar teks aan, omdat dit 'n alternatiewe soort optrede vir vroue wat in oppressiewe sisteme lewe illustreer, en daarom mag dit bydra tot sosiale en politiese verandering. Die tipe skrif verskaf terselfdetyd 'n lewensbelangrike uitlaat vir baie Afrikaanse skryfsters wat oppressie in hul eie lewens ervaar, sowel as 'n geleendheid om hulle ervarings van oppressie in 'n meer konstruktiewe manier te analiseer en oorvertel.

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## **Introduction: Writing in the Face of Oppression**

In her preface to Unwinding Threads, a collection of African women's writing, Charlotte H. Bruner has the following to say about African women writers in general:

The African woman writing fiction today must be somehow exceptional. Despite vast differences in traditional beliefs among African societies, any female writer must have defied prevailing tradition if she speaks out as an individual and as a woman. (1)

This is due to the fact that many African women writers have experienced colonial oppression first hand, and the societies they live in still bear the scars of this imperialist system. They are also subjects of patriarchal social systems and are therefore faced with sexual discrimination in virtually every aspect of life. This thesis will briefly describe the influence of these oppressive factors on African women writers in general, and examine the influence they have had on Tsitsi Dangarembga's choice of narrative strategies when writing Nervous Conditions. The fact that she subverts familiar narratives and existing literary forms in the novel will be demonstrated in chapters one and two, and the effect of this will be discussed. Finally, the significance of the production of novels like Nervous Conditions in oppressive social and political circumstances will be discussed in the conclusion.

According to Obioma Nnaemeka, "By the time Flora Nwapa's Efuru (1966), the first published novel written by an African woman, was published, a uniquely male literary tradition was already in place in Africa" (140). Male dominance in the African literary arena has continued mostly unchallenged to the present day, and this has caused critics like Femi Ojo-Ade to comment: "African literature is a male-created, male-oriented, chauvinistic art" (158). Many critics have explained the conspicuous absence of the female voice in African literature as the result of the collusion of patriarchal and colonial oppression that African women have previously experienced in their societies, which, for example, prescribed domestic roles for women:

The relative scarcity of women writers in the African literary canon may be partly explained by the opposition of colonial education, family and gender policies to women engaging in pursuits apart from domestic ones. (Davies and Fido 312)

The reality of colonial and patriarchal oppression in women's lives is explored by Dangarembga in Nervous Conditions:



Dangarembga seems to suggest that patriarchy, as is expressed in all forms of male dominance of the female, heightened by the contradictions of colonial experience, creates the nervous state of psychological condition which afflicts the female characters in varying degrees of intensity. (Uwakweh 78)

The novel shows that this nervous tension may be critically debilitating, and that women become unable to resist or speak out against their oppressors. Pauline Ada Uwakweh identifies this “silencing” effect as a powerful means of patriarchal control, as it is often caused by the pressures women experience within patriarchal systems:

Silencing comprises all imposed restrictions on women’s social being, thinking and expressions that are religiously or culturally sanctioned. As a patriarchal weapon of control, it is used by the dominant male structure on the subordinate or ‘muted’ female structure. (75)

Colonial and patriarchal restrictions make it exceptionally difficult for women to speak out, as the act of speaking out involves rebellion against the dominant social order, and therefore will inevitably meet with disapproval and censure.

The fact that women are oppressed and considered inferior is frequently demonstrated by the way women are portrayed by the dominant male literary tradition, and these distorted images contribute to the perpetuation of women’s oppression. According to Uwakweh (75): “...patriarchal subordination of the female is reflected in the male domination of the literary arena, a situation which has always questioned the realism of female characterization in male fiction”. Stratton claims that “...the sexist formulations of colonial racism are adopted with little or no revision...” by many male writers (18). The limitations of common portrayals of women are also evident in “...a recurring tendency in male fiction to emphasize traditional or conventional images of the African women as wife and mother...” (Uwakweh 75). Florence Stratton defines this phenomenon as “...the double bind of calcification or catalepsy... enacted by men writers in their texts”, and claims that it is caused by “...the identification of women with petrified cultural traditions and the allocation to male characters or narrators of the role of regaining control over the historical development of their societies” (8). These novels do not accurately reflect social realities in Africa today and are therefore unable to provide commentary which is relevant for the members of their authors societies.

Elleke Boehmer demonstrates that these stereotypical representations of men and women have been influenced by nationalist ideologies, as well as prevailing patriarchal and former colonial discourses: "...the nationalist ideology or ideologies which inform African literature have worked to limit representations of and by women" (229). Nationalist novels often present the following stereotypical portrayals of women:

External to the 'serious' affairs of the nation, [women are] most often found in the form of inviolable ideal or untouchable icon - that is, if she is not excluded entirely from the action as a subversive quantity and a threat. Her role is that of emblem, and either tainted or sacrosanct. (Boehmer 230)

Although women are symbolically placed above men, in practice their roles become rigidly defined, because symbols have inscribed values which are static and unchanging. Ojo-Ade describes the practical implications of this kind of symbolism: "Woman is considered to be a flower, not a worker. Woman is supposed to be relegated to the gilded cage; she is not the contributor to, the creator of a civilization" (158). The influence of nationalism on gender relations is therefore to "...encode gender definitions which operated to justify and maintain the status quo of women's exclusion from public life" (Stratton 10), and to rob women of agency as thinking, feeling subjects of a nation. The African woman writer is therefore denied critical political consciousness, and the ability to contribute in any significant way to nation-building. Many women writers, such as Dangarembga, set out to contradict and challenge these discriminatory misrepresentations, but it is evident that they are engaging in a struggle against a well-established and entrenched tradition.

A particular response to the way nationalism has been used to prescribe gender roles is evident in Buchi Emecheta's novel, Destination Biafra (1979). Firstly, by recording the events of the Nigerian civil war from the point of view of a woman, "...Emecheta breaks through [a] conspiracy of silence, a silence that protects male interests" (Stratton 123). For example, she uncompromisingly describes the exploitation and abuse of women in a war situation and includes shocking accounts of rape and the abuse of women which male accounts of the war tend to gloss over. Her main character, Debbie, has nationalistic ideals and by joining the army attempts to serve her nation in a conventionally male way. Emecheta uses Debbie's unconventional, controversial choice of vocation to demonstrate "...the dilemma patriarchal constructions of social roles pose for women" (Stratton 124). However, the novel implies that Debbie is

misguided, as she cannot gain acceptance from her fellow soldiers, and therefore cannot serve her nation in this way. Eventually she uses the funds that her father had laundered as a corrupt politician to open orphanages for children who have been bereaved during the war, and therefore adopts a conventional female role.

This can be interpreted as a compromise on Emecheta's part, as she seems to imply that the social realities in her society make it impossible for a woman to succeed and be accepted in a male environment. Debbie's nationalist aspirations are channeled into more conventional avenues, as she chooses "...to serve her nation in a traditionally female way - through mothering" (Stratton 125), although the novel also emphasizes that this feminine contribution is vital for the reconstruction and sustenance of the damaged society it describes. It is thus evident that the writing of male and female African authors is not diametrically opposed in the way in which women are portrayed. In fact, many female African writers seem to have internalised and accepted the inferior position of women in their novels, and therefore tend to relegate their female characters to domestic, supportive roles.

Nnaemeka claims that women lack the courage to portray female characters differently because of prejudice and bias in the critical arena. She claims that

...the African women writer's awareness of the powerful gaze of the reader / critic (usually male); this gaze circumscribes them and compels them to 'negotiate' the creation of their fictional characters. (142)

She believes that this has led to:

...the marginalization of radical female characters in [their novels]. By limiting women to 'little happenings' and family matters, many African women writers have restricted themselves to what I would call 'domestic literature' or more specifically 'motherhood literature'. (Nnaemeka 150)

She quotes Emecheta's claim that her primary concern as a writer is to portray the everyday domestic events in women's lives, as evidence for this argument (Nnaemeka 150).

However, compared to African literature by male authors, women writers have received relatively little serious critical attention, or have been virtually ignored in the critical arena until

recently. According to Stratton, this lack of recognition has been frustrating and demotivating for women writers. She quotes Ama Ata Aidoo in this regard:

[It] is especially pathetic to keep on writing without having any consistent, active, critical intelligence that is interested in you as an author... Therefore, it is precisely from this point that African writing women's reality begins to differ somewhat from that of the male African writer... (4)

She also claims this former lack of critical attention is one of the major reasons for the non-admission of novels by African women writers to the literary canon, as admission requires the existence of a body of critical works regarding the novel in question (3). She argues that literary canons are artificial creations that are often the products of conservative ideologies:

Recently critics concerned with marginalized literatures have... insisted that literary canons, rather than reflecting objective judgments of literary merit, are artificial constructs that are imposed by an elite and that reproduce and reinforce existing power relations. (4)

It is therefore hardly surprising that many women writers have struggled to gain entrance into the canon of African literature, as this reflects the subordinate position they occupy in their societies. Recently major women's presses have been established and many post-colonial African women writers have come to the fore and enjoyed a degree of popularity and critical acclaim. However, critics like Trinh T. Minh-ha claim that this popularity is somewhat due to a tendency to "exoticize" these writers, and once again this precludes these works from receiving serious critical attention:

Being 'merely a writer' without doubt ensures one a status of far greater weight than being 'a woman of colour who writes' ever does. Imputing race or sex to the creative act has long been a means by which the literary establishment cheapens and discredits the achievements of non-mainstream women writers. She who 'happens to be' a (non-white) Third World member, a woman, and a writer is bound to go through the ordeal of exposing her work to the abuse of praises and criticisms that ignore, dispense with, or overemphasize her racial and sexual attributes. (6)

Women authors also face significant practical challenges concerning the production of their work. Ojo-Ade explains that this is due to the economic circumstances in many African countries: "Writing is still largely an esoteric vocation, a haven of an elite, anathema to an illiterate majority faced with the immediate realities of misery concerned with survival" (159). Many women are not privileged enough to engage solely in this "esoteric" occupation, and

therefore have to snatch whatever opportunities are available to write, in addition to caring for a family and earning a living. Minn-ha describes this situation as follows:

Substantial creative achievement demands not necessarily genius, but acumen, bent, persistence, time. And time, in the framework of industrial development, means a wage that admits of leisure and living conditions that do not require that writing be incessantly interrupted, deferred, denied, or at any rate subordinated to family responsibilities. (7)

Emecheta's novel Second Class Citizen (1994) describes this kind of situation, as the heroine has to struggle to find time to work on the manuscript of her first novel, whilst caring for five young children and her husband in their cramped, miserable quarters in London.

In addition, women writers have experienced great difficulty getting novels accepted for publication. According to Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savoy Fido in 1993, "...women still have relatively less access to publishers than do men. Many African women writers speak of manuscripts that are ignored for years by male editors and reviewers" (312). In spite of the recent increase in popularity of novels by African women writers, a workshop held in Zimbabwe in 1992 to discuss the relative lack of works by Zimbabwean women writers identified the following problems: "...male arrogance and prejudice towards women's writings, sexism in the publishing field, and the lack of educational opportunities for the majority of Zimbabwean women" (Uwakweh 75). Dangarembga's novel was the first novel to be published by a Zimbabwean woman; her experience bears testimony to these accounts as her novel was rejected by a Harare-based publishing company because it was regarded as too radically feminist before it was published in 1988 (Veit Wild 331).

A further difficulty women writers face is a lack of solidarity and support from other women in their societies. Dangarembga describes this phenomenon in the following way:

...women don't want to lose the social security which they gain from having a relationship with a man. The feminist, who in Zimbabwe is usually a single woman, is a threat to the other women, and this means there cannot be any solidarity between women either. (Petersen 347-8)

It is evident that she has experienced this phenomenon first hand; when asked by Kirsten Holst Petersen about her support group she replies bluntly "I have none" (348). This situation, where women discriminate against and ostracise other women who dare to challenge the oppressive

status quo, demonstrates the extent to which African women have accepted and internalized oppressive, prescriptive discourses regarding their roles in society. African women writers have grown up with the same pressures, and therefore have to be aware of the possible negative psychological effects of their exposure to these discourses when they write:

Speaking both to and from the position of other(s), black women writers must... deal not only with the external manifestations of racism and sexism, but also with the results of these distortions internalized within [their] consciousness of [themselves] and [each other]. (Henderson 259)

The marginalization of radical female figures previously discussed may therefore be a product of women writers' internalization of the oppressive discourses in their societies: "The marginalization of nonconformist characters might reflect the dilemma of women writers who are still striving to understand who they are, especially in relation to liberation and feminism" (Nnaemeka 151). This confusion regarding identity is also demonstrated by the fact that in their novels "...they [often] show their feminine protagonists as torn, confused, in a milieu of cross-cultural conflict" (Bruner 1). According to Mae Gwendolyn Henderson it is also reflected by the interlocutory, dialogic nature of many novels by African women:

What is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women's writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic character, reflecting not only a relationship with 'other(s)', but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity. (Henderson 258)

However, the use of many "voices" may also be seen as a reflection of the complex subjectivity of African women authors and demonstrates that multiple responses to their situation are possible. Nervous Conditions provides an example of the dialogism Henderson discusses, as Dangarembga uses the strategy of narrating her main character from a later perspective in her novel, and this immediately introduces two voices and provides two different versions of events.

Against this difficult and oppressive background, the strategies that Dangarembga adopts to portray the events in her novel become highly significant. According to Nnaemeka, "As these women writers assume their marginal position on a masculine literary culture, they deploy different strategies to (re)present the specificity of their positionality" (142). These strategies are frequently used to demonstrate the uniqueness of their sociopolitical environment, and to ensure that their voices emerge and are heard against a background which for many years did not favour



their literary endeavours. Dangarembga adopts a number of strategies in her novel which fulfil this function. For example, she uses a strategy that Rachel DuPlessis has called “writing beyond the ending” and has defined as “...the transgressive intervention of narrative strategies, strategies that express dissent from dominant narrative.” the function of which is “...the deconstruction of established literary styles and conventional roles assigned to women in fiction...” (Quoted in Uwakweh 78). Uwakweh claims that:

Dangarembga has written beyond the ending by the sheer liberation of voice and the self-conscious awareness that Tambu gains, not within the text (her story), but outside of it. Freeing herself from patriarchal control and the danger of cultural alienation, Tambu achieves the superior status of interpreter. (78)

In other words, Tambu’s development to the point where she is supposedly able to retell her story in such an insightful and illuminating manner is not described as part of the novel; rather it is implied by the way in which she retells her story. The reader has no doubt that she has achieved full consciousness as she is able to interpret events in this way, and thus she assumes a highly non-conventional role in her society. Dangarembga’s unconventional use of the first person is another example of the way in which she undermines literary convention, as she invites the reader to expect a simple retelling of events; however, she introduces another, wiser, more critical voice by narrating events from a “hindsight”, beyond the ending perspective, and this is used to undermine the reader’s expectations and deliver startling political commentary. According to DuPlessis this is also typical of writing beyond the ending, as she thus “...produces a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feelings that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised (Uwakweh 78).

This thesis will examine the ways in which Dangarembga deconstructs established literary styles and subverts familiar narratives, to achieve her ideological goals. This is over and above the obvious challenge her novel represents to sexist portrayals of African women in novels written by both African women and African men, as she emphasizes the uniqueness of a women’s position in colonial Africa and also shows that African women are not powerless and are able to make decisions which may radically influence their situation. The first chapter examines Dangarembga’s divergence from conventional portrayals of African women in many feminist texts, as she refuses to succumb to stereotypes and sensitively portrays the uniqueness of her male and female characters’ responses to oppression. The second chapter demonstrates that

although the novel initially appears to conform to the traditional pattern of a “Bildungsroman”, it then deviates from and subverts this pattern. The function of both strategies is to shift emphasis from individual characters to the factors which cause their oppression and “nervous conditions”, and to paint a multi-faceted and diverse picture of her characters and situation in her country. Dangarembga therefore effectively uses unusual narrative strategies to deliver powerful social and political commentary on the situation in her country, and to ensure that her voice is heard in the African literary arena.





## **Chapter 1: The Novel as Feminist Text**

Like most other feminist texts, Nervous Conditions focuses on the oppression of women and challenges derogatory, inaccurate portrayals of African women by other writers. This includes the writing of many feminist critics regarding the position of African women. Dangaremba challenges the inherent assumptions of these texts in a number of ways: firstly, she does not attempt to generalize or make sweeping statements about the universal oppression of women, as she focuses on the varying responses her characters to the specific socio-political environment she describes. In this way, she makes it difficult for other writers to assimilate her novel into a white, western feminist problematic; according to Stratton, many other African women writers' texts have been handled in this way by western feminist critics (12). Her approach, which celebrates multiplicity and differences between all of her characters, therefore challenges what Chandra Mohanty calls "The assumption [that all] women [are] an already constituted and coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location..." and the "...notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally or even cross-culturally" (199). Stratton also claims that many Western feminist writers have been guilty of "...the denial of social and historical agency to women of other cultures, and the obliteration of cultural and historical difference" (109). Dangaremba's focus on the particular social and political factors in her society restores a sense of the unique "otherness" of this situation in the reader's mind, as they are transported into the cultural environment of Zimbabwe in the 1960s. Dangaremba's portrayal of her female characters challenges a tendency in western feminist writing to regard African women as ultimate victims. Her text demonstrates that there are many ways of coping with their situation and choices available to women, even though the specific situation she describes is extremely complex and stressful.

The trends in feminist writing which Dangaremba's text challenges are evidence of a lack of understanding regarding the position of African women on the part of many feminist authors, and as a result these texts may articulate opinions which are shortsighted and destructive. According to Stratton, many western critical texts about African women's writing have been characterized by Eurocentrism, and a lack of critical awareness of their intrinsic western bias. On

the other hand, Mohanty claims that writing by many Western feminist critics is characterized by a self-conscious awareness of artificially constructed differences between their position and the position of African women and women in the Third World in general. It is important to note that she does not confine her criticism to First World writers, but also includes African and Asian feminist writers who write about their rural or working-class sisters as “Other” (197). Mohanty objects to the fact that many feminist texts produce and then colonise the Third World woman or Other as “a singular monolithic subject”, where colonisation implies “...a relation of structural domination, and a discursive or political suppression of the subjects in question” (196). This colonisation takes the form of:

...a certain mode of appropriation and codification of ‘scholarship’ and ‘knowledge’ about women in the Third World by particular categories employed in [feminist] writing which take as their primary point of reference western feminist interests as they have been articulated in the US and western Europe. (Mohanty 196)

The critical categories which Mohanty takes issue with are those of “Third World Women” and “Third World Difference”, as she claims that this kind of colonisation is articulated through the use of these terms. She describes “Third World Difference” as it is used in many feminist texts as “...that stable, ahistoric something that apparently oppresses most if not all of the women in [the Third World]” (198). She goes on to claim that:

It is in the production of this kind of “Third World Difference” that western feminists appropriate and colonize the constitutive complexities which characterise the lives of women in these countries. (198)

One of the serious consequences of applying these categories in an uncritical, homogenic manner is that it reduces women in Third World countries to stereotypes, instead of recognizing them as thinking, feeling human beings capable of making choices and taking definite action. Mohanty argues that:

...the application of the notion of women as a homogenous category to women in the third world colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social, class, and ethnic frameworks, and in so doing robs them of their historical and political agency. (211)

At the same time it also reflects and contributes to the continuation of existing power relations between Africa and the First World by perpetuating racist and imperialistic attitudes:

...the definition of the “Third World Woman” as a monolith might well tie into the larger cultural and economic praxis of “disinterested” scientific inquiry and pluralism which are the surface manifestations of a latent economic and cultural colonisation of the “non-Western” world. (Mohanty 212)

According to Stratton, this state of affairs has also seriously retarded the development of independent African theories of literature (12), as well as negatively affecting the critical contribution and accuracy of texts which ignore the multiplicity and cultural differences between the position of women in Africa and the Third World, and which distort and exaggerate the differences between the position of women in the First World and the Third World.

In contrast, Dangarembga’s portrayal of her society and her characters emphasizes the multifaceted and unique nature this situation, and of her characters’ responses to oppression.

According to Heidi Creamer:

..she does not reduce oppression to gender oppression or colonial oppression. Instead she creates a story of five women who have different ways of living within the systems of coloniality and gender oppression that make up their lives. (351)

This approach “...helps create a framework for representing political complexity, psychological depth, and inner struggle” (Creamer 351). Nnaemeka supports this argument; she claims that by portraying various responses to the situation in some detail, Dangarembga shows that the marginalized space these women occupy is:

...a whole expanse of physical, intellectual, and psychological space with its own dynamics, contradictions and tensions. In actuality, the so-called margin is an immense heterogeneous space punctuated by boundaries and edges which define the limits of numerous pockets of realities. (141)

Some critics such as Frank and Umeh, have exaggerated a sense of difference or otherness between themselves and African women to such an extent that they have set up a simplistic binary opposition between the African identity of women and their ability to achieve personal freedom and emancipation:

In order to be free and fulfilled as a woman [the African woman] must renounce her African identity because of the inherent sexism of traditional African culture. Or, if she wishes to cherish and affirm her ‘Africanness’, she must renounce her claims to feminine independence and self-determination. (Stratton 478).

By implication it is impossible for African women to transcend their status as victims because of their location in oppressive social systems. This claim is strongly disputed in Dangarembga's novel, as she demonstrates how female characters are able to influence and alter their position, and are able to achieve various degrees of personal liberation.

Discriminatory attitudes which categorise African women as members of a homogenous "Third World group, or which regard African women as powerless victims have contributed to African women writers like Dangarembga and Emecheta actively distancing themselves from Western feminist schools of thought. In a much quoted interview, Emecheta emphasizes her location within a specific socio-political context and refuses to enter the feminist debate:

For myself, I don't deal with great ideological issues... Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman's eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I would be called a feminist, but if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small "f". (quoted in Nnaemeka 150)

Similarly, Dangarembga emphasizes the specificity of her background and perspective, and denies having attempted to make universal ideological statements about the oppression of women in her novel:

"I find that with my experiences, being a woman and an African woman and having the kind of background that I have had, it's difficult to make any points of any sort outside the family framework" (Wilkinson 194).

Dangarembga's non-adherence to any particular school of feminism is evident in the way she approaches her subject matter from a number of different angles. Unlike radical feminists, who typically explore the tension between male domination and female rebellion, and traditional socialist feminists, who analyze the dialectics of gender, class and race, she shows how the patriarchal as well as the colonial system oppress her female characters (Uwakweh 77). She also explores the complexity of female rebellion against a patriarchal social order. She thus uses an eclectic approach to demonstrate the complexity of her society. Emecheta has adopted a similar stance, as she:

...situates herself quite firmly within a specifically female tradition which she celebrates and from the position of which she launches an attack on the male tradition. But she also displays some affinities with the male tradition, sharing, for example, similar views on colonialism and on Nigerian politicians. (Stratton 132)

Because she uses an eclectic approach, Dangarembga's text deals with a number of socio-political issues, such as economic inequality between black and white people in her country, as well as the issue of the oppression of women and men in her society, and the scale and scope of her novel becomes significantly wider as a result.

By sensitively portraying the multiplicity and complexity of the specific factors that oppress her characters, Dangarembga demonstrates that the assumption that all women are oppressed in similar, universal ways, is a myth and thus challenges the feminist assumptions previously discussed. Her novel is set in the British colony of Rhodesia in the 1960's; Dangarembga shows that women in this particular society experience both colonial and patriarchal oppression in ways which subtly interlock and reinforce each other, and as a result their unique position is extremely complex. Tambu's mother links and distributes the blame for the oppression women experience between the colonial and patriarchal systems, as she describes the "burden of womanhood" to Tambu:

When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them... And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa! (16)

"The poverty of blackness" refers to the economic degradation the majority of this black population experience as a result of the white settlers having appropriated the best farming land, while "the weight of womanhood" refers to the self-sacrifice and ceaseless labour involved in fulfilling the prescribed role of good wife and mother in this patriarchal society. The intensifying effect of poverty on patriarchal oppression is a recurring theme in women's novels about colonial Africa: The Joys of Motherhood (1979) by Buchi Emecheta describes how Nnu Ego's unhappy marriage and lack of status as a woman becomes almost unbearable because of the extreme poverty her family experiences in Lagos.

Dangarembga's choice of title and foreword for her novel announces her engagement with Franz Fanon's classic study of the psychological effects of colonial oppression on its subjects, The Wretched of the Earth (1986), in which he claims that the condition of being a native is a "nervous condition". Although her text supports Fanon's analysis on some scores, she challenges the fact that Fanon's text focuses on a homogenic, implicitly male subject of

colonialism, and fails to recognize that the position of colonized women should constitute a separate category of analysis. In fact, his text fails to deal with the position of African women except on a very general level.

Fanon's study demonstrates that male subjects experience a great deal of tension and stress in a colonial situation:

When the native is confronted with the colonial order of things, he finds he is in a state of permanent tension. The settler's world is a hostile world, which spurns the native, but at the same time a world of which he is envious. (41)

Supriya Nair (84) argues that if colonized men experience anxiety, the nervous tension women experience as subjects of dual and interlocking forms of oppression must be extreme. Like Fanon's male subject, who is taught to be ashamed of his heritage by the racist colonizer, women are faced with sexist, destructive, and humiliating versions of their value and roles in society which originate in both of these systems. Similarly Dangarembga's novel demonstrates that the condition of being an African women in Zimbabwe is more complicated or "nervous" than the condition of an African man, and can easily lead to psychological conditions in African women, as they also have to deal with their lack of significance and status in the patriarchal system. In fact, the novel describes how each of the female characters develop nervous conditions to some extent. The title "Nervous Conditions" can therefore be interpreted as an ominous metaphor for the internalized definitions of femaleness that result from intense social and political pressures, and that shape women's private and public lives from within (Androne 38).

By choosing this title for a novel which primarily focuses on women's experiences, Dangarembga also takes issue with the fact that during the colonial era, African women were frequently considered too "primitive" and lacking in the political consciousness necessary to suffer from the nervous afflictions associated with Fanon's colonized Africans. Ngugi describes these sexist and patronizing attitudes regarding African women's experience of colonialism:

Colonial melancholy became the ambivalently privileged condition associated with the male subject. The neuroses of female subjects are not just devalued but unrecognized, either because pathological behaviors are seen as a natural condition of their unstable psyches, or because they are refused the agency and critical consciousness necessary to react to their psycho-social environment. (quoted by Nair 131).



Dangarembga's title therefore contains a liberating suggestion, as it affirms the fact that women have cognitive and emotional resources which contribute to their intense suffering, but which also make it possible for them to transcend the situation she describes.

In his study of the impact of colonialism on colonized people, Fanon identifies the loss of land during colonization as a critical psychological blow: "For a colonized people the most essential value because the most concrete is first and foremost the land. The land which will bring them bread and above all, dignity" (34). Dangarembga supports Fanon's analysis of the destructive effects of the colonial system on her native society, as Tambu's grandmother's stories describe the arrival of the white settlers and the way in which the land is appropriated in extremely negative terms:

Wizards well-versed in treachery and black magic came from the south and forced the people from the land. On donkey, on foot, on horse, on oxcart, the people looked for a place to live. But the wizards were avaricious and grasping; there was less and less land for the people. At last the people came upon the gray sandy soil of the homestead, so stony and barren that the wizards could not use it. There they built a home. (18)

Words like "treachery", "black magic", and "avaricious and grasping" portray the settlers as dishonest and greedy, and she therefore presents an alternate version of the people's experience of colonization to the justifying narratives promoted by the colonial education system. However, in spite of the injustice she has experienced firsthand, Tambu's grandmother's stories demonstrate a degree of acceptance of colonial rule, as the overriding moral of these stories seems to be acceptance of the prevailing power structures. In Tambu's words, these stories showed that "...life could be lived with a modicum of dignity if you worked hard enough and obeyed the rules" (18). Questioning why this should be so is not encouraged. A belief in their powerlessness to change the situation has therefore been internalized by many members of the colonized population, and this lessens the chance of any significant, unified rebellion against the white government being organized.

Dangarembga continues her demonstrations of the intricacies of this specific situation as she shows that the white settlers in Rhodesia have patronizing and deeply racist attitudes towards African people. This is demonstrated with subtle irony by Tambu's grandmother's choice of words when recalling the colonists' praise of her son: "[Babamukuru] was diligent, he was

industrious, he was respectful. They thought he was a good boy, cultivatable in the way that land is to yield harvests that sustain the cultivator" (19). The words "sustain the cultivator" highlight the exploitative motives of the British and stand in sharp contrast with the justifying narratives Babamukuru has been taught at the mission which explain British control of his country; for example, that Africans are inherently uncivilized, barbaric, in need of guidance and salvation, as well as the technological advancement the white settler generously provides. A further implication of this description is that as an African, Babamukuru lacks the critical ability and consciousness to make independent decisions, but will simply retain and regurgitate ideas that are planted in his young, impressionable mind. Ironically this is what he does to a large extent; as an adult he lives according to the values he has been taught by the colonists. However, the fact that he has elected to live by these values is evidence of the powerful influence of the education system, rather than his inherent intellectual inferiority.

Many writers have discussed the destructive and subversive nature of a colonial education such as the education Babamukuru receives. Fanon describes the radical racial prejudice inherent in the ideologies on which this education system is based:

Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values. It is not enough for the colonist to affirm that these values have disappeared from, or better still never existed in, the colonial world. The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but the negation of values. (The Wretched of the Earth 32)

Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, one of the most well-known African writers on the subject of colonial education, also examines the psychological effect of students being indoctrinated by negative, discriminatory discourses about themselves during their education. According to him, this kind of education:

...becomes a means of mystifying knowledge and hence reality. Education, far from giving people the confidence in their ability and capacity to overcome obstacles... tends to make them feel their inadequacies in the face of reality; and their inability to do anything about the conditions governing their lives. They become more and more alienated from themselves and from their natural and social environment. (Decolonizing the Mind 56-7)

This education system was therefore a powerful tool by which the colonizing power maintained control. This was firstly due to the fact that it produced subservience: it "...encourage[d] a slave mentality, with a reverent awe for the achievements of Europe" (Ngugi: Towards a National



Culture 14). This sense of inferiority was also created by promoting English culture, and by creating a society where mastery of the English language was the key to achieving status and wealth:

The teaching of English to Africans must be seen as a process of safeguarding European interests... This was to be done by making sure that these Africans had the same views and culture as their colonial masters. (Ngugi: Return to Roots 61)

As well as presenting their intervention and exploitation of the population in a favorable light, a key strategy of the colonizers was to distort the history of the country's native population. Ngugi claims that the colonial education system either distorted or completely disregarded the African scholar's history, which subsequently created a huge dilemma for African writers:

Through [the African writer's] colonial, middle-class education, he found that he had no history. The black man did not really exist. He had slept in a dark continent until the Livingstones and the Stanleys woke him into history through a gentle prod with a Bible and a gun. (Decolonizing the Mind 6)

Dangarembga shows that this strategy has caused a great deal of tension in this society, as her characters have to come to terms with unflattering and humiliating versions of their national heritage and culture. Nnaemeka speaks of "The cultural schizophrenia often associated with the alienated colonized..." (142) to describe this situation of divided loyalties between traditional and colonial culture. If negotiating between different versions of one's heritage and culture causes nervous tension, accepting the colonizer's negative version of a black person's identity and role is detrimental to colonized people's sense of pride and self-worth. Fanon's study shows that acceptance of negative, discriminatory versions of their identity leads to self-disgust, depression and apathy in oppressed people (42).

In the novel, Dangarembga uses Nyasha to describe the effects of internalizing the colonizer's destructive teachings about their heritage in the novel. During one of her agonizing outbursts she screams: "Do you see what they've done? They've taken us away. Lucia. Takesure. All of us. They've deprived you of you, him of him, ourselves of each other. We're grovelling" (200). Her words show that submission to colonialism has caused an integral part of the identity of each character to be violated, if not destroyed, and also demonstrate that there is a lack of support and solidarity between members of this community. Because of their different social status and

education, and the various degrees to which they have internalized and accepted colonial and patriarchal ideas about themselves, characters have become isolated from one another.

During her tirade, Nyasha rampages through her room, shredding her school history book with her teeth, shouting: “Their history. Fucking liars. Their bloody lies” (201). This violent and excessive behaviour illustrates the extent of her outrage at the damage that has been done to her native society. Ironically, this behaviour could be regarded by the colonists as conforming to a stereotypical idea that Africans are controlled by their passions, and are primitive and violent. Her action identifies the history book, which represents the colonizers’ treatment of her people and the ideologies used to justify the colonial intervention, as the central cause of the breakdown of relationships and individual psyches in the novel. This powerfully endorses some of Ngugi’s findings regarding the negative effect of the colonial education system, which propagates colonial ideology, on African students’ development:

Its repressive nature lies latent while its ideological power manufactures willing consent of both elite and non-dominant populations that then reproduce the structures of colonialism and capitalism. Hence the material benefits of education are suspect at best, self-destructive at worst. (Quoted by Nair 131)

Fanon's analysis concurs with Ngugi’s claims, as he demonstrates that colonial powers intentionally produce compliant, “anxious” natives as a means of maintaining control: “..[this] disintegrating of the personality, [this] splitting and dissolution all fulfills a primordial (oppressive) function in the organism of the colonial world” (45).

The term “manufacturing consent” Ngugi uses is commonly associated with Noam Chomsky, who has contributed a number of works on the function of propaganda in society. According to him, “manufacturing consent” represents a “revolution in the art of democracy”, where propaganda is used “...to bring about agreement on the part of the public for things that they didn’t want by the new techniques of propaganda” ([www.zmag.org/chomsky/talks/9103-media-control.html](http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/talks/9103-media-control.html)). According to him, real power rests in the hands of a small executive group in society. He identifies another group, the specialized group, “...which is relatively educated, more or less articulate, [and] plays some role in decision-making” ([www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Senate/3761/consent.html](http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Senate/3761/consent.html)). He continues to argue that:

If the specialised class can come along [to the executive class] and say, I can serve your interests, then they'll be part of the executive group... That means they have to have instilled in them the beliefs and interests that will serve the interests of private power... They have to be deeply indoctrinated in the values and interests of private power and the state-corporate nexus that represents it. ([www.zmag.org/chomsky/talks/9103-media-control.html](http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/talks/9103-media-control.html))

Chomsky's analysis becomes relevant to this discussion if we regard the colonial education system as being a powerful source of propaganda used by an elite group of colonial rulers. Babamukuru and all the characters in the novel who go through the colonial education system would be members of Chomsky's "specialised class", and as such would be subject to the most intense indoctrination and pressure.

Compliance with the oppressor is one of the responses that Dangarembga's characters demonstrate in this situation, as she describes in her novel how Babamukuru and other characters in the novel collaborate with the white government to varying degrees and help uphold and perpetuate the existing power relations between black and white, because of the powerful colonial indoctrination they have experienced which "manufactures consent". Babamukuru and Maiguru's compliant attitude towards the white settlers and their pseudo-English lifestyle at the mission is evidence of the extent to which they have been colonized and westernized. The English décor, food and eating customs at their dinner table stand in sharp contrast to Maiguru's ritualistic acknowledgment of Babamukuru's status as male head of the family, which is particularly evident when food is dished out. This demonstrates that Nyasha's parents are attempting to embrace and reconcile deeply divided cultures, at considerable cost to themselves and their family.

The novelist uses Nyasha to articulate the ironic truth that although Babamukuru and others like him have been seduced by the promise of entering the white settlers' realm of privilege and power, they will never in fact be allowed to do so because of the deeply racist attitudes of the colonizers. However, their superior status and education have caused them to be estranged from their native community. In this way the best minds of the country are trapped in a static position, with no further opportunities for advancement, and they are isolated from the support and solidarity of their fellow-countrymen. In the novel, Tambu's development illustrates this

process, as her living conditions at Sacred Heart convent reflect the segregation and inequality of black and white students, whilst her progress towards her educational goals causes increasing alienation from her support group. At first she is unable to communicate with Anna at the mission, then her relationship with her mother and family becomes problematic, her friends ostracize her, and finally she loses contact with Nyasha, her best friend and former mentor.

Dangarembga's analysis of socio-economic issues, which is intended to demonstrate the uniqueness of the society she portrays, identifies the patriarchal system as a further source of the oppression of women in this society, but her approach sensitively demonstrates the complex nature of this particular social environment which once again distinguishes it from other feminist texts. The novel demonstrates that the patriarchal system in this society can be harmful and destructive to women's development, for example, by the way in which it portrays the negative influence Babamukuru has on Tambu. Whilst at the mission, her over-compliance with Babamukuru's will begins to stifle her confidence and independence. When Tambu becomes aware of this, she makes the following bitter comment about the oppression of women: "It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition... Men took it everywhere with them. Even heroes like Babamukuru did it" (115-6). Dangarembga uses Nyasha's tragic rebellion against Babamukuru's patriarchal control to explore the consequences of rebellion against this system of rigidly defined social roles. She also shows how Jeremiah's attitude and behaviour makes his wife miserable, and how even Nhamo begins to display sexist, discriminatory attitudes towards his sisters at an early age.

Dangarembga's portrayal of the patriarchal system is primarily conducted through her portrayal of Babamukuru and the influence he wields in Tambu's family. The collaboration of the patriarchal and colonial systems in perpetuating the oppression of women in this society is evident in the fact that Babamukuru's superior education has enabled him to emerge as the "ultimate patriarch", because it has afforded him economic security and limited status within the colonizer's society, and has elevated his status within his society enormously (Uwakweh 79). Tambu's grandmother's stories elevate and mythologize him before his grand entrance in the novel after a protracted stay in England. This entrance takes the form of a triumphal procession, as his relatives, (male and female), sing his praises and prostrate themselves at his feet. This

virtual deification of Babamukuru demonstrates the immense power he wields in his family; rebelling against one of his decrees is socially unacceptable, as it would indicate an incomprehensible lack of respect and gratitude towards the man who is their revered leader and generous benefactor. The novel therefore emphasizes how complicated and difficult it may be for women to rebel against their subject status in a patriarchal society.

Dangarembga also demonstrates that patriarchal control is frequently upheld and intensified by the colonial system, by showing that because of Babamukuru's responsible position as the eldest son of the family and family patriarch, as well as his colonial "Christian" upbringing at the mission, he has become a rigid upholder of conservative values regarding female decorum and conduct. According to Stratton, this conservatism, which takes the form of identifying women with traditional roles, has an "...underlying ideological function as a means of perpetuating women's subordination" (118). The novel shows how Victorian ideas about female morality taught at the mission are combined with existing patriarchal ideas in many subtle ways to limit and restrict women's roles. Stratton claims that Victorian attitudes such as "a woman's place is in the home" frequently led to the privileging of male subjects in the colonial education system, as formal, higher education was much more accessible to boys than it was to girls. The education of women was viewed with suspicion, as it could lead to women rejecting their roles as subservient wives and mothers, and playing alternative roles in society (7). Nnaemeka explains how educational discrimination against women effectively silenced the female voice in society:

As the transition was made from oral to written literature, new imperatives for mastery emerged. The factors that legitimated centrality shifted from those based on age and sex to those based on knowledge of the colonizer's languages... (138)

As a result "The sexual politics and Victorian ideals of colonial education created a hierarchy privileging men and virtually erasing any meaningful [cultural and political] female presence" (Nnaemeka 139):

Babamukuru's conservative ideas regarding women's education become evident when he explains his concerns about Tambu attending Sacred Heart convent, a prestigious and well-respected school. The basis for his objections is the fear that receiving an education may cause her to become "loose":

...it was a dangerous site for a growing girl who would lose her sense of place in the traditional family structure, a lack of mooring that would apparently lead to a woman's looseness or immorality. (Nair 135)

Babamukuru's attitude reflects the prevailing prejudice concerning women's education in this society, but is highly ironic in light of the fact that his wife, who is a model of domesticity and female subservience, has obtained a Masters Degree in Philosophy at an English university. This inconsistency demonstrates the extent of his "programming" or indoctrination in this regard. Feminist critics like Minn-ha would argue that Babamukuru's attitude also reflects a deep, subconscious belief that education "unfeminizes". She explains that in many Third world countries, the education of women is frequently regarded with suspicion, because "Being able to read or write, a learned woman robs man of his creativity, his activity, his culture, his language" (19). Educated women therefore pose a serious threat to male domination in society. In the novel, *Dangaremba* demonstrates how an educated, single woman's morals are immediately called into question, and this places additional pressure on Zimbabwean women to adopt traditional family roles. Women who challenge these rigidly prescribed roles are immediately branded as whores; in the novel both Nyasha and Lucia experience this phenomenon first hand.

Stratton argues extensively that colonialism contributed to the suppression of women's influence and public contribution to society, drawing on the fact that in pre-colonial societies, women were important participants in the oral tradition. Many women in pre-colonial Africa were poets and storytellers, and occupied positions of wisdom and authority in their communities. In these oral societies, the role of storyteller was extremely important as the poet was a historian, a custodian of culture, and a teacher. Social commentary was frequently included in a poet's repertoire, and female characters often played principal roles in the dramas these female poets created. The fact that women no longer played this role in colonized societies, because of the disruption of traditional culture and the imposition of Victorian ideas regarding gender roles, led Stratton to conclude that "...colonialism is not neutral to gender. Rather it is a patriarchal order, sexist as well as racist in its ideology and practices" (7).

This sexist aspect of colonial government was evident in the existence of legislation in some colonized countries prohibiting single women living in major towns and cities, as they were regarded as a disruptive, destabilizing force in society. Stratton describes a single woman's



dilemma as a result: "...if, in order to improve her economic status, she chooses to migrate to the city or seek employment, she is labelled a 'prostitute' or singled out as the cause of national 'indiscipline'" (17). The effect of this was to accelerate "...the process of women's economic marginalization by relegating them to the rural economy, which in practice often meant subsistence farming" (Stratton 16). Women were therefore forced to marry and adopt the traditional role of wife and mother to obtain social and economic security by the colonial system. In her novel The Slave Girl (1977), Emecheta demonstrates how western, Christian ideologies have caused a similar situation in her society, and cleverly describes a woman's role in marriage in language which reflects a mixture of traditional, colonial and Christian values:

There was a certain kind of eternal bond between husband and wife, a bond produced by centuries of traditions, taboos, and latterly, Christian dogma. Slave obey your master. Wife, honour your husband who is your father, your head, your heart, your soul. (The Slave Girl 173)

Although she uncompromisingly describes how women are oppressed in this social and political environment, Dangarembga's portrayal gains depth and complexity because of the sympathetic way in which she portrays her male characters. Instead of portraying them as selfish tyrants or as scapegoats, she shows that men are also victims of colonization. Her sympathetic attitude towards men, which is evident in the novel, is explained by her in an interview with Petersen, when asked why women and men receive unequal treatment in Zimbabwe:

I think the easy answer in the West is the patriarchal system. I have become increasingly more reluctant to use this model of analysis as it is put forward by Western Feminism, because the situation in my part of the world has one variable, which makes it absolutely different: the men are also victims.

She therefore does not undermine Fanon's analysis of the effect of colonialism on its (male) subjects; rather she "...esteems Fanon's analysis of psychological implications of colonialism and capitalism" (Creamer 351). However, she also extends and qualifies his analysis by including and differentiating between the position of women and men, and in this way her novel delivers unique and interesting insight into a situation which has often been interpreted in a simplistic, reductive way by outsiders to the situation, or in a way which ignores the differences between men and women in this situation.

Dangarembga's focus and sympathetic portrayal of male characters also differentiates her novel from other feminist texts. Her portrayal of Babamukuru, the powerful patriarch, demonstrates that although he appears to be successful and emancipated, he is entrapped in many subtle ways. Babamukuru enjoys relative freedom and self-determination in the colonial world, and is allowed the luxury of adhering to rigid, often impractical beliefs because of the unchallenged authority of his position in the patriarchal hierarchy. Tambu's description of his character highlights this apparent freedom:

He was a rigid, imposing perfectionist, steely enough in character to function in the puritanical way that he expected, or rather insisted, that the rest of the world should function. Luckily, or maybe unluckily for him, throughout his life Babamukuru had found himself - as eldest child and son, as an early educated African, as headmaster, as husband and father, as provider to many - in positions that enabled him to organize his immediate world and its contents as he wished. (87)

However, the addition of "or maybe unluckily for him" is significant, as it hints at the fact that he is entrapped by the roles he has elected to play and by others' expectations of him (Uwakweh 30). His personal values and "steely character" ensure that he plays these roles with meticulous, "puritanical" dedication, never daring to deviate from social prescriptions.

Dangarembga hints at a degree of dissatisfaction with his position when she describes how Babamukuru suffers from "bad nerves" and is happiest when he is at the homestead, fulfilling his role as leader of the family, whereas at the mission he continually negotiates between two conflicting cultures (Thomas 29). Ironically, his indoctrination is so complete that he enforces illogical and inappropriate solutions to problems at the mission. For example, he decides that the bad luck his family has been experiencing is due to the fact that Mainini and Jeremiah have not been married in a Christian church, and therefore must be remarried (147). Ironically, this belief is as superstitious and impractical as Jeremiah's suggestion that they consult a medium about this issue. Babamukuru's decision also demonstrates that he has adopted the colonizer's attitude towards his native culture, and that he regards traditional customs as barbaric and wicked. Tambu resents the fact that her parents will be made a spectacle of, and her rebellion takes the form of mutely lying in bed and refusing to participate on the day of the wedding. For Tambu, acceptance of Babamukuru's censure of her home and culture would force her to radically revise



her sense of identity and of self, as these things have previously formed an integral part of her life, and provide her with a sense of security and identity.

The tension Babamukuru feels as a result of his entrapment is expressed in his intolerance towards Nyasha in particular, as the insecurity and subconscious “rage” he feels because of his powerlessness are unjustly directed at her (Uwakweh 30). The author uses Nyasha to articulate the many ironies in her family’s position. During her breakdown, Nyasha accurately and bluntly describes the reality of her father’s (and her mother’s) position to Tambu:

‘It’s not their fault. They did it to them... To both of them, but especially to him... But its not his fault, he’s good.’ Her voice took on a Rhodesian accent. ‘He’s a good boy, a good munt. A bloody good kaffir,...’ (200)

It is remarkable that in spite of her father’s treatment of her and the breakdown of their relationship, she is able to describe the situation objectively and display a degree of understanding and sympathy towards him. Once again this demonstrates Dangarembga’s strategy of making the reader aware of the complexity of the situation, and the complexity of her character’s responses to it.

Dangarembga adopts a similar uniquely sympathetic approach in her portrayals of Jeremiah and Nhamo, the other primary male characters in the novel. She demonstrates that the compliance and exploitative nature of Jeremiah is exacerbated by his poverty and sense of powerlessness in the colonial power structure, as well as negative teachings about himself and his people which he has internalized. This results in a negative self-image and a lack of pride and dignity, and he therefore displays fawning, overly compliant behaviour towards Babamukuru and others when in need of money or supplies. He makes up for his lack of status by exploiting his position as authority figure in Tambu’s home, as he abuses the self-sacrificial nature of his wife and bullies his female children to boost his threatened ego and masculinity. This leads Tambu to comment bitterly: “The needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate” (12). The implication is that in an oppressive colonial situation, men are often tempted to exploit their authority over their wives in the patriarchal hierarchy to boost their self-esteem, and this worsens the position of women like Mainini.

In Emecheta's novel, The Joys of Motherhood, Nnu Ego's husband Nnaife demonstrates a similar response to colonial oppression. Nnaife is portrayed as a tyrant, who refuses to take responsibility for the economic affairs of the family and drinks beer with the men all day long, whilst Nnu Ego is expected to work herself to death to provide for the family. Like Jeremiah, he is lazy and arrogant, and is totally unappreciative of Nnu Ego's self-sacrificial labour. A clue to this behaviour is provided at the beginning of the novel, as the reader is informed that he works as a washer man for a wealthy white lady. This could be regarded as an extremely "unmanly" occupation, and the reader realizes that he suffers from a poor self-image and ego. The colonial system has robbed him of his manhood and his traditional status by radically altering the economic structure of this society and plunging the majority of the African population into poverty.

During his short life, Nhamo begins to adopt the arrogant and exploitative attitudes of his father towards his mother and sisters. His inflated sense of self importance is encouraged when he is given the opportunity by Babamukuru to attend the mission school, in the hope that an education will eventually enable him to assist his family financially. When he returns to the homestead after a term at the mission, he refuses to speak Shona to his mother and sisters, refuses to help with the daily chores, and behaves in a thoroughly disagreeable and spoiled manner. Nevertheless, Dangarembga's portrayal of him allows the reader to realize that he is an impressionable young boy, brought up with certain ideas and values which the colonial education system has served to entrench:

Perhaps I am making it seem as though Nhamo simply decided to be obnoxious and turned out to be good at it, when in reality that was not the case; when in reality he was doing no more than behave, perhaps extremely, in the expected manner. (12)

Nhamo's assimilation of colonial values demonstrates the power of the colonial education system which has caused him to regard his language and cultural origins as inferior in a remarkably short period of time. It is therefore evident in both cases that Dangarembga's novel is unusual as a feminist text because of the degree of insight and complexity in displays into the position of its male characters.

It is evident that Dangarembga portrays the intricacies of this specific situation in a great deal of depth. Similarly her portrayal of female characters highlights the fact that the women in her society are a heterogeneous, dynamic group and that they respond to oppression in a number of different ways, thus continuing her challenge to critics and texts that disregard this fact. Her portrayal of Maiguru shows that although Maiguru appears to conform willingly to social prescriptions for women, she is also capable of rebelling, and this demonstrates that her compliance with the patriarchal system is a deliberate choice. She belongs to an elite minority as she has received a liberal education abroad, and is therefore aware of other modes of existence for women. However, she chooses the role of perfect Shona wife and mother and the limitations of this position, and performs her duties with a great deal of dedication. Tambu is amazed to find out how highly educated her aunt actually is, as she does not draw attention to her education in any way (97). This is possibly because the fact that she has an equal qualification to Babamukuru would detract from his achievements and undermine his prestigious position to some extent.

In spite of her Western education, Maiguru enjoys no status or recognition and works for the mission with no compensation. She also cannot drive, and relies on Babamukuru for transportation. According to Nyasha, she has made no effort to learn to drive, and this demonstrates her collaboration in the perpetuation of her dependent status. She has forfeited her independence and allows Babamukuru to have complete supremacy in their relationship to counter the negative effect of colonialism on him and boost his fragile ego and sense of self worth. Maiguru rationalizes her position by extolling the virtues of self sacrifice for husband and children to Tambu: “But that’s how it goes, Sisi Tambu! And when you have a good man and lovely children, it makes it all worth while” (102). At mealtimes her submission to Babamukuru is most conspicuous, but this submission is made to seem contrived and forced in subtle ways:

...the ritual dishing out of food to the family makes [her] subservience, dependency and fussy playing of the angel in the house highly visible, [and] her behaviour becomes most hysterically over compliant with Shona patriarchal expectations. She infantilizes herself intellectually and emotionally by using baby talk... (Thomas 29)

This unnatural behaviour is evidence of the fact that like Babamukuru, she is entrapped, and plays a prescribed role with steely determination and precision. The energy required to suppress her true potential means that she is unable to respond honestly and spontaneously to her daughter in particular, who needs her support desperately.

However, the fact that Maiguru is not a helpless victim is demonstrated as she leaves Babamukuru and rebels against her lack of status in her home. Her subsequent actions illustrate how difficult it is for women to exist in this society without the social security men provide, as she goes to her brother, thus seeking out the protection of another man. On her return to the mission, however, she seems happier and more relaxed:

She smiled more often and less mechanically, fussed over us less and was more willing to talk about sensible things. Although she still called Babamukuru her Daddy-sweet, most of her baby talk had disappeared. (175)

This change is due to the fact that she has taken decisive action and proved to herself that she is not helpless in her situation. She has also forced her husband to demonstrate his appreciation and need for her by coming to fetch her home. However, the extent of her rebellion is limited as ultimately she has not changed her physical situation and chooses to return to her suppressed, inferior position. This is possibly due to the fact that she has financial stability, a dutiful husband, and a superior position in her community, and these things make the limitations of her situation worthwhile. It is possible to interpret Tete Gladys' behaviour in the same way, because although she does not seem to agree with all of the decisions the men make during the "dare", she does not contradict them as she enjoys the status and security of her position as a matriarch of the family.

Mainini's response to oppression differs a great deal from Maiguru's, as she seems to believe in her powerlessness and victim status. However, the novelist demonstrates that she also has the opportunity to make decisions and change her situation, and therefore she is partly responsible for her circumstances. Mainini seems to have fatalistically accepted the "burden of womanhood" she describes to Tambu, and has internalized her lack of worth in both the patriarchal and colonial systems. As a result her life is spent serving and obeying the whims of men, with little or no recognition and thanks. Tambu despises her mother's helplessness and fatalistic acceptance of her circumstances, but Dangarembga portrays Mainini sympathetically, describing the exhausting physical labour she endures, the despicable, exploitative nature of her husband, and the fact that she is taken for granted by her family (Thomas 33). According to the novel she has

had her spirit broken by her husband, and by the years of abject poverty which she has endured since her marriage at the age of fifteen.

The self-destructive nature of her protest about Tambu's educational advancement demonstrates her hopelessness and sense of apathy, as she loses interest in eating and feeding her baby. Her behaviour conforms to Sue Thomas' description of hysteria as a common psychological response to the kind of oppressive circumstances described in *Nervous Conditions*:

The hysteric in *Nervous Conditions* is a product of precariously repressed rage at patriarchal and colonial domination; it is defiance through excess through over-compliance with domination, which (psychically) mutilates the self to prevent brutalization at the hands of others - hence the tragic self-defeat entailed by hysterical resistance. (27)

It is interesting that this definition identifies hysteria as a misguided attempt at rebellion, instead of an admission of powerlessness and victimhood. In Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego demonstrates similar hysterical, defeatist responses to oppression. Like Mainini, she has accepted her powerlessness and lack of worth, and complies with male domination until she is completely exhausted and burnt out. She becomes depressed and frustrated, and after the death of her first male baby she tries to commit suicide. She only begins to express a sense of "rage" at the injustice of this situation at the end of the novel, when circumstances like Adaku's rebellion have demonstrated to her that other responses to her situation are possible.

Tambu and Nyasha also demonstrate different strategies and make choices in order to cope with their oppressive circumstances, and once again this demonstrates how Dangarembga challenges the assumption that all African women are helpless victims. As teenagers, they are involved in the difficult process of discovering their identity, and having to negotiate between vastly different ideas concerning their potential roles in society in addition causes both a great deal of nervous tension and confusion. They both attend British schools and face indoctrination by the colonial education system, and both are shown to be in real danger of having their spirits squashed or broken by Babamukuru, who also prescribes rigidly defined roles for them. Dangarembga's literary strategy therefore "...demystifies the patriarchal system and underlines the dangers of stifling female growth and individuality" (Uwakweh 79).

The novel shows that the patriarchal system has a stifling effect on Tambu, as her attempts to conform to her uncle's prescriptions cause her former capacity for criticism, her individuality, and her spontaneity to be subdued. Tambu describes the extent of her compliance in the following way:

Beside Nyasha I was a paragon of female decorum, principally because I hardly ever talked unless spoken to, and then only to answer whatever question I had been asked.  
(155)

And:

I became embarrassed by my acquired insipidity, but I did not allow myself to agonize over it, nor did I insist on any immediate conclusions. I felt secure at the mission under Babamukuru's shadow and I could not understand why Nyasha found it so threatening.  
(116)

However, some of her former independence is restored when she takes the significant step of defying Babamukuru before her parents' wedding. Predictably she is subsequently labelled as ungrateful, but it is as if a reawakening of her mental capacities and individuality takes place, and she realizes what has happened to her at the mission:

My vagueness and my reverence for my uncle, what he was, what he had achieved, what he represented and therefore what he wanted, had stunted the growth of my faculty of criticism, sapped the energy that in childhood I had used to define my own position.  
(164)

As a result of this developing consciousness, she is able to begin critically examining her circumstances, and this includes re-evaluating the value of colonial education, which she has previously pursued with single-minded dedication.

Nyasha's response to the situation is particularly complicated because of her awareness of a number of choices available to her. Because of her exposure to Western culture, she has to choose between a number of conflicting versions of her role in society: Western, Shona, colonial, and her father's. Her father's prescriptions for her are complicated by his own cultural dislocation, as they include achieving academic success in the English school system, and being a model of Shona feminine virtue (Thomas 30). She is isolated and alienated from her community as a result of spending a number of years in England and becoming partially Westernized, and therefore has no support or input from her peers, and it becomes increasingly



difficult for her to make choices. She explains her dilemma about her background in the following way:

"They think I do it on purpose, so it offends them. And I don't know what to do about it Tambu, really I don't. I can't help having been there and having grown into the me that has been there." (78)

Nyasha's parents misunderstand the dislocation and confusion she experiences as a result of her exposure to a foreign culture, and her extremely intelligent and precocious nature, and they are unable to give her any support or guidance. Maiguru tends to spoil Nyasha by humoring her "little ways", whilst Babamukuru becomes increasingly disappointed and embarrassed by his daughter's behaviour (Thomas 29). This lack of affirmation from her father hurts Nyasha keenly, but adopting the role of "good daughter" would mean suppressing other dimensions of her being, such as her critical mind and independent spirit. It becomes evident that her exposure to various cultures and her isolation lead to her developing shrewd insights into her situation, and she is able to analyze issues and events objectively from an outsider's point of view. In this regard she is like Margaret in Bessie Head's *Maru* (1971), who is ostracized by the community she teaches in because of her racial origins and lives in isolation in a derelict library on top of a hill. The novel demonstrates how isolation affords her the insight and objectivity necessary to interpret and provide commentary on the community life down below through her painting. However, it exacts a high cost in personal terms, and she eventually experiences a partial breakdown before she is "rescued" by Maru.

Nyasha's relationship with her traditional, conservative father is a source of a great deal of tension and confusion for her. She is involved in an ongoing, destructive conflict with him, because her independent behaviour poses a direct threat to Babamukuru's authority, and threatens to disturb the image of himself and his family he wishes to portray to the public. The extent of his anger and disappointment in her is demonstrated when Nyasha behaves like a typical rebellious teenager, and comes home late from a school dance, and Babamukuru reacts excessively and calls her a whore. She lashes out at him physically in response, and this act is a shattering rejection of his authority and prescriptions for her, as she refuses with every inch of her being to accept this version of her identity. The reader may sympathize with her action, but it causes her a great deal of anguish and confusion, as Tambu recalls:

I sensed the conflict she was going through of self versus surrender and the content of sin... she was growing vague and detaching herself from us. She was retreating into some private world we could not reach. (118)

This description demonstrates Nyasha's continued vulnerability and desire to please her family, as well as the fact that she is experiencing painful psychological conflict as a result of her exposure to oppressive influences.

Nyasha eventually develops anorexia as a response to her circumstances; Dangarembga once again shows that this is highly complicated response to her situation, as opposed to Nyasha being defeated and victimised by her situation. As a response to an oppressive situation, Nyasha's anorexia has been interpreted in various ways by critics. According to Uwakweh (81), anorexia signifies a rift between Nyasha's mind and body, because her female flesh, in her opinion, is largely responsible for relegating her to subjection and second class citizenship, and for binding her independent spirit. The author also uses anorexia to symbolically represent the division and cultural dislocation Nyasha experiences. However, Thomas believes that Nyasha's anorexia is meant to be "...a critical and highly ambiguous attempt at self-determination" (31), as Nyasha attempts to gain limited control over her body and the physical aspect of her existence in this way. It also represents a rejection of the "...sexual and cultural politics enacted [at her dinner table]: the ritualized subservience, baby-talk and fussiness of the mother; the father's reassertion of domestic authority" (Thomas 31). Rejecting the food her parents provide at this table therefore becomes a highly symbolic act, as it represents her rejection of a situation in which she is subjected to immense pressures because of her simultaneous location within two conflicting ideological systems. It also represents a rejection of the helpless and masochistic elements of her mother's behaviour which Nyasha despises.

If this interpretation is adopted, the fact that Nyasha develops anorexia is not an admission of her helplessness and victim status in this situation; instead it is an attempt to gain power over herself and her situation and express her rebellion. In fact, it may be seen as a rejection of powerlessness, as taking such extreme control of one's body may be interpreted as an attempt to regain power and control in an oppressive situation. A large number of feminist texts about hysteria as a feminine response to oppression support this kind of analysis. For example,



Michelle Vizzard (4) states that “As [Nyasha’s] outward and verbal rebellions are thwarted, a silent, corporeal rebellion takes their place, as anorexia is the typical modern expression of hysteria. She quotes Elizabeth Grosz’s findings regarding hysteria to support her argument:

Hers is a mode of defiance of patriarchy, not the site of its frustration. In this sense, the hysteric is a proto-feminist, or at least an isolated individual who, if she had access to the experiences of other women, may locate the problem in cultural explanations of femininity rather than in femininity itself. The hysteric’s defiance through excess, through overcompliance, is a parody of the expected. (4)

Throughout the novel, Nyasha has been concerned with her figure and conformed to western stereotypes of female beauty; the fact that she develops anorexia, a malady usually associated with the West, implies that her exposure to Western culture has had a powerful influence on her development. However, her anorexia can also be interpreted as Dangarembga’s rejection of the “Third World Difference” previously discussed, as Nyasha, an African woman, has developed a psychological malady many people associate exclusively with white, middle-class Western women. Creamer explains how her illness challenges distinctions between Africans and white people in this society:

A diagnosis would show the English that she is not a 'grateful African', and that the rigid distinctions between African and English are permeable because she acts as 'English' as they do. A diagnosis would force Babamukuru to treat her as westernized, instead of expecting her to forget everything she learned in England. (357)

The fact that the doctors consulted, white and black, are unable to correctly diagnose her condition demonstrates their inability to accept that an African may be Westernized, as this challenges all of their preconceived ideas. It is tragically ironic that she is treated as a naughty child, as this belittles the extent and sophisticated nature of her suffering. Also, she has emerged as the only character able to correctly identify the negative effect oppression is having on her people during the novel. Dangarembga shows that she develops anorexia as a result of a series of choices she has made and that she is in control even at this stage in the novel; the fact that she seems to have made the wrong choice, as ultimately she does a great deal of damage to her body, is understandable, as Dangarembga has provided insight into the factors which make her situation extremely confusing and difficult and that have made her believe that anorexia is her only option.

Dangarembga's emphasis on the uniqueness of her characters and their complex socio-political environment implicitly challenges the validity and depth of literary criticism which does not take all of these factors into account. Her approach challenges the stereotype of the passive envious native woman, suffering from an inferiority complex, as she examines the various coping mechanisms her characters develop, and the complex nature of the situation and the powerful myths and social forces which support it (Thomas 27). Her literary strategy therefore powerfully undermines and counters generalizations which have been made regarding African women (and men), as it demonstrates how each character develops a unique and highly individual response to the situation. At the same time, her literary strategy has the important function of allowing her to deliver social and political commentary, and the focus of her novel includes the social, political, racial, and economic factors which cause women's oppression. Not only do her female characters emerge as a diverse, dynamic group in the novel, but the wide spectrum of issues the novel covers greatly increases the scope and relevance of her commentary.

## **Chapter 2 : The Novel as “Bildungsroman”**

The term “Bildungsroman” was originally coined by the German critic and philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, who first used it in an 1870 biography of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Dilthey defines the term as follows:

[The Bildungsroman] examines a regular course of development in the life of the individual; each of its stages has its own value and each is at the same time the basis of a higher stage. The dissonances and conflicts of life appear as the necessary transit points of the individual on his way to maturity and harmony. And the “highest happiness of humankind” is the development of the person as the unifying, substantial form of human existence. ([www.webdesk.com/quotations/bildungsroman.html](http://www.webdesk.com/quotations/bildungsroman.html)).

He goes on to explain that “The movement in the Bildungsroman is a reasonably direct line from error to truth, from confusion to clarity, from uncertainty to certainty, from... nature to spirit” ([www.webdesk.com/quotations/bildungsroman.html](http://www.webdesk.com/quotations/bildungsroman.html)). A “Bildungsroman” traditionally has two aspects: firstly, the hero achieves success in social and material terms, often against great odds, as the result of extraordinary courage and determination. Secondly, the development of the individual’s critical consciousness and independence is recorded, and by the end of the novel the individual has achieved a degree of freedom and self-actualization, and transcended his or her previous limitations. *Nervous Conditions* initially appears to conform to the familiar pattern of a “Bildungsroman”, as it describes the development of consciousness and identity in the young and impressionable Tambu, as she struggles to gain an education and improve her physical and social situation. However, Dangarembga subverts the reader's expectations, as the novel differs from a traditional “Bildungsroman” in a number of significant ways. She uses the difference between the reader's expectations and the reality she presents to create an opportunity to deliver social and political commentary on various issues including the colonial education system, as this is the vehicle Tambu chooses to achieve her emancipation.

Dangarembga's engagement with the “Bildungsroman” genre has been preceded by other feminist writers, who have used it and modified it in various ways. In many of these novels, the development of consciousness is a necessary precursor to a woman rejecting her prescribed role in a male dominated society, and the development of her feminist consciousness. The feminist “Bildungsroman” therefore traces the development of a woman’s consciousness to the point

where she rebels, and independently and self-consciously attempts to redefine her identity and role in society. For example, in Emecheta's semi-autobiographical novel, Second Class Citizen (1994), Adah initially endures sexual discrimination against women in her society without question. Her husband Francis describes the oppressive, socially accepted attitude towards women in their society in the following way: "In our country, and among our people, there is nothing like divorce or separation. Once a man's wife, always a man's wife until you die. You cannot escape. You are bound to him" (Emecheta 182). Once the family moves to London, she heroically and self-sacrificially supports her family of five young children, whilst Francis flunks his university courses due to arrogance and laziness. Significantly, Adah eventually throws him out when he destroys the manuscript of her first novel, the writing of which proclaims her as an independent, conscious being, with an identity and opinions outside of her subservient, degraded position in this family. Emecheta's second novel, Head Above Water (1986), describes the tremendous hardships and struggle she subsequently endures as a single mother in an inherently racist London society, ostracized by her own people and Londoners alike.

Dangarembga takes this kind of feminist subversion of the familiar "Bildungsroman" a step further, by demonstrating that an individual's quest to achieve consciousness and independence becomes virtually impossible in the kind of society she describes, because of the intense pressures and tensions caused by colonialism, which exacerbates traditional prejudice against women. In this way, the emphasis of the novel shifts significantly from the individual's quest for emancipation to the broader social and political context in which Tambu's quest takes place, and the factors which make her emancipation extremely difficult. This is contrary to the typical "Bildungsroman", as the genre is strongly influenced by western humanism and tends to celebrate the unlimited potential and ability of an individual to achieve his or her goals in any circumstances.

Dangarembga's subversion of the "Bildungsroman" occurs in a number of different ways. Firstly, her narrative strategy differs significantly from the familiar "Bildungsroman", which frequently traces the development of the protagonist from a singular, highly subjective point of view, and tends to record events chronologically. In this type of novel the consciousness of the narrator is the only point of reference for the reader (James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

(1916), and D. H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers (1914) illustrate this kind of narrative strategy). In Nervous Conditions, Dangarembga allows Tambu to retell the story of her development from hindsight. The critical tone Tambu uses whilst narrating clearly indicates to the reader that she has successfully managed to "escape" and develop an independent point of view, and that this narrative is expressing dissent and challenging the oppressive discourses in her society.

Tambu's critical stance becomes evident during the opening sentences of the novel: "I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling" (1). Nair explains the effect of Dangarembga's shock tactics in the following way:

The categorical tone of the first person narrator signals a critical self-examination, quite conscious about rejecting the guilt associated with 'unnatural' sisterhood and an inhuman lack of feeling. In declining indifference as a cause, she indicates that there is agency and deliberation in her refusal to mourn her brothers' untimely death. (133)

The beginning of the novel therefore announces in no uncertain terms that the narrator is fully self-conscious, critical and independent. This has the effect of defusing the usual tension of the Bildungsroman which centers around the success or failure of the individual's quest for emancipation, and shifts the focus to Tambu's circumstances. For example, the beginning of the novel immediately demonstrates that harmonious family relations have broken down, and causes the reader to wonder what kind of unnatural pressures have caused the family unit to become divided against itself.

With the benefit of hindsight, the narrator is able to take on an interpretative role and present an analyzed and reconstructed version of events, instead of simply reporting events as they occur. Dangarembga demonstrates that there is a large disjunction between her former and latter consciousness and describes events and her former self with subtle irony, and this creates a "space" in which the narrator may deliver criticism and commentary. This technique is frequently evident when she describes her former optimistic interpretations of events; for example, the way in which the narrator uses exaggeration and repetition to describe her admiration of Babamukuru's generosity towards Lucia emphasizes the naïveté and predictability of her reaction:

That evening as we prepared for bed I simply had to tell Nyasha for the umpteenth time how wonderful Babamukuru was, how good and kind it was of him to be so concerned about Lucia and how, because of this, he deserved all our love and respect. (159)

Tambu is obviously repeating parrot-fashion what she has been told “umpteen” times by her parents about Babamukuru, and the reader is aware that he is more concerned with performing what he believes to be a socially expected and generous deed, than with her or Lucia's individual well-being. This is demonstrated by the fact that he has difficulty remembering her name, and calls her “this girl” when he first proposes to take Tambu to the mission (56).

Because of Dangarembga's technique, two voices are heard in the novel; the voice of Tambu as narrator and the narrated Tambu. The former has “escaped” whilst the latter is in the process of defining and problematizing what escape entails, and comes dangerously close to having her individuality suppressed by the dominant order(s) in her society. There is an ever-widening split between the two voices as the story unfolds, and the effect of this disjunction is to subvert the integrity of the first person initiation novel which assumes the unity of self, and to allow the narrator to demonstrate how stressful circumstances made her development confusing and difficult and threatened to fragment and disrupt her sense of identity (Androne 39). As narrator, Tambu is also able to expose inconsistencies and ironies, and the reader is provided with two possible interpretations of events. This broadens the scope of the novel, whilst the younger Tambu's insights and personal experiences are provided as a point of reference for the reader.

The second way in which Dangarembga's novel differs from a “Bildungsroman” is in its broad scope, as it focuses on the individual as part of a community instead of dealing exclusively with the subjective experiences of one person. According to Mary Jane Androne, Dangarembga achieves this effect and subverts the traditional “Bildungsroman” by comparing and contrasting two different plots or paradigms for the development of selfhood (40). The first paradigm is Babamukuru's success story: through hard work and self-sacrifice Babamukuru single-handedly achieves an education and relative prosperity, status and freedom in his community. However, this paradigm is consistently undermined in the novel, as Dangarembga demonstrates that the means Babamukuru has chosen to achieve his goals (colonial education) has led to a greater and more subtle form of entrapment. Instead of being emancipated and independent, his assimilation



into the colonial structure has led to him becoming a conformist and a suppressed figure, who is isolated from his family and community by the roles he has elected to play.

The second paradigm of success the novel presents and strongly endorses is one of growth within the community, which runs contrary to the “Bildungsroman’s” celebration of the unlimited potential of the individual. The narrator describes the novel as “...my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men...” (204), which immediately places her development in the context of her community. This type of emphasis on the community and focus on social issues has become a familiar theme in African writing because of influential novels like God’s Bits of Wood (1960) by Sembene Ousmane, and novels by Chinua Achebe and Ngugi. In God’s Bits of Wood, the most powerful and successful acts against oppression are the result of communal, rather than individual effort. The protest march to Dakar organized and undertaken by women is compared to a great river rolling to the sea (Ousmane 204), which suggests the power and unstoppable nature of this concerted rebellion against the authorities. In her novel, Dangarembga demonstrates that involvement with the community provides Tambu with vital resources and an alternate form of education necessary for women to transcend the confusion and anxiety caused by colonial education, which critics like Ngugi regard as a kind of brain-washing, (see chapter one) and sexual oppression.

For Tambu, being part of the community provides her with an alternative version of her culture and heritage and presents a positive and empowering version of her people’s history. In addition, the struggles and decisions of other people, particularly those whom Tambu cares about, provide her with an alternate framework for evaluating and setting her goals. According to the narrator, her involvement with others in her community “...wakes her from her sleepwalking” (172) at the mission, and is therefore critical in preventing her developing consciousness being permanently suppressed by Babamukuru and the colonial education system. The novel suggests that without this influence her quest for emancipation would have failed. This revision of the normal pattern of a “Bildungsroman” once again emphasizes the unusually stressful nature of the circumstances she has to negotiate.



The ways in which her involvement with the community influences her development are twofold. Firstly, Tambu is provided with a sense of identity and a solid foundation, as the stories her grandmother tells provide her with a vital link to her heritage, and a different version of her role as a woman in society. Tambu's early experiences at the homestead also have a great influence on her when determining her goals. For example, the relentless poverty and backbreaking labour she experiences on the farm create in her a burning desire to escape these conditions and enjoy a more comfortable, pleasant lifestyle, and she identifies education as the means to achieve this goal.

Tambu's fervent desire to obtain an education is sparked by her desire to leave the homestead, as well as to somehow escape the "burden of womanhood" her mother dolefully describes. It is typical of the complexity of Dangarembga's portrayal that she does not romanticize the homestead as representing a more wholesome, traditional way of life. Instead she uncompromisingly describes the squalor and the harshness of this way of life. This serves as an indictment of the colonial regime, which according to the novel has appropriated the best farming lands, and inflicted poverty and degradation on the people as a result. On her return to the homestead, Tambu is shocked by the dirt and squalor she finds:

The thatched roof of the kitchen was falling out in so many places that it would be difficult to find a dry spot inside when it rained. Great big holes gaped in the crumbling mud-brick walls of the tsapi, and the hozi was no more than the reminder of a shelter... When I went to the pit latrine... I almost gagged. ...now faeces and urine contaminated every surface, so that it was impossible to find a place to put your feet and you were tempted not to bother to weave your way round to the holes. (123)

The graphic nature of these descriptions have the effect of making Tambu's desire to leave the homestead entirely understandable to the reader. Colonial education therefore becomes powerfully attractive as a way to attempt to escape these circumstances; the novel shows how the lure of the education system is almost irresistible to her and others like her.

The Tambu who lives in the rural community at the homestead is, however, altogether a more powerful and decisive figure than the confused, anxious figure who emerges at the end of the novel. This runs completely contrary to the normal pattern of an individual's development in a "Bildungsroman". Tambu's original independence and determination is demonstrated, for

example, by her hard work to grow maize to pay for her school fees for the next term, and thus further her educational goals. According to Nair, this action represents:

[A] challenge to the exclusionary circulation of money and non-recognition of the women's symbolic and material value enacted in Tambu's use of the informal market economy, traditionally the domain of women. (134)

The means by which Tambu chooses to earn money is significant, as she is reclaiming her place in a previous tradition where a woman's role as the cultivator of crops afforded her a degree of financial independence. The fact that she chooses of her grandmother's plot to cultivate her crop emphasizes the link with this past tradition, as the novel describes her grandmother as "...an inexorable cultivator of land, sower of seeds and reaper of rich harvests" (17). Unfortunately Tambu's efforts are virtually thwarted by her brother, who steals her crop because he is jealous of her and resents the challenge to male dominance which her efforts implicitly represent. The primary obstacle Tambu faces if she is to become educated is therefore sexual discrimination in her society. Her father expresses the attitudes which make it virtually impossible for a girl in Tambu's circumstances to obtain an education: "Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables" (15). The fact that Tambu's admission to the mission is entirely the result of unfortunate circumstances undermines the idea that she could have overcome these discriminatory attitudes through her own efforts, and demonstrates her powerlessness in this situation. Once again this runs contrary to the humanistic ideals underlying the "Bildungsroman" genre.

Once at the mission, Tambu slowly begins to recognize and accept the limitations of her position as a woman, and she forsakes her former desire to emulate the powerful figure of Babamukuru in her grandmother's stories, and chooses Maiguru as an alternative role model. She admires Maiguru's sophistication and charming domesticity, but this shift signifies a growing realisation that she has to partially accept socially prescribed roles for women if she is to survive in this oppressive, prescriptive society, and this realisation results in a loss of her earlier confidence and independence. It is significant that this occurs once she has been removed from the relative security of the homestead and her community.

Compared to the homestead, the cleanliness and relative comfort of the mission initially dazzles Tambu and convinces her that this is a better way of life, in spite of the fact that she has had to leave her home and family. However, her experience of Nhamo's "conversion" causes her to attempt to cling on to a sense of her roots and origins, even though she does not fully understand why this is necessary. She therefore has an advantage, as she has previously seen how seductive and alluring the prospect of education, wealth and relative status in colonial society can be. Nevertheless, the narrator's descriptions often make it seem that she will fail and will be seduced by her new environment. For example, she recalls that "My horizons were saturated with me, my leaving, my going. There was no room for what I left behind" (58). The narrator uses playful irony to recall Tambu's awestruck first impressions of the homestead, and to describe how she is tempted to regard her transition to this life as a dream come true. The powerful impact the mission has on her is demonstrated by her use of exaggerated metaphors:

...the real situation was this: Babamukuru was God, therefore I had arrived in Heaven. I was in danger of becoming an angel, or at the very least a saint, and forgetting how ordinary people existed - from minute to minute and from hand to mouth. The absence of dirt was proof of the otherworldly nature of my new home. (70)

However, Dangarembga's use of irony undermines and demonstrates the naïveté of Tambu's impressions. For example, a note of caution regarding life at the mission is immediately sounded by Maiguru's kitchen, which initially delights Tambu, who associates cleanliness with wealth and status because of her own experience of dirt and poverty. The narrator recalls that a pane of glass was missing from the window, the plastic and enamel is dull, and the sink "gleamed greyly" (67). This hints at the fact that Babamukuru's apparent wealth is limited, and that his position is not as privileged as Tambu initially seems to believe.

It is evident that Tambu leaves the homestead innocently convinced that she has already "escaped", and that she will find a completely new, glamorous, and more sophisticated version of herself waiting at the mission. She also believes that the education she will receive will allow her to rescue her sisters and the rest of her family from their poverty. Like Babamukuru and Nhamo, she cannot resist the temptation to revel in self-importance, and in her imagined role as beneficent saviour of the family:

It was up to [my sisters] to learn the important lesson that circumstances were not immutable, no burden so binding it could not be dropped. The honour for teaching them this emancipating lesson was mine. I claimed it all, for here I was, living proof of the moral. There was no doubt in my mind that this was the case. (58)

The irony of this exaggerated self-importance is evident to the reader. Tambu's initial confidence is also due to the fact that she is sure she will be able to avoid the dangers and contradictions along her chosen path to emancipation. Her problem is that apart from a desire not to become like Nhamo and forget herself and her roots, she is unable to define many of these dangers and contradictions in concrete terms.

It is important that Tambu comes to recognize at a later stage that her former life on the homestead, which she initially regarded in an extremely negative light, has formed an integral part of herself and her development, and cannot be left behind. When speaking of Nyasha, she demonstrates this awareness: "[Nyasha] did not know that essential parts of you stayed behind no matter how violently you tried to dislodge them in order to take them with you." (173). She has therefore realized that her belief that she would leave her previous self behind at the homestead, and find a completely new, more glamorous, and powerful self waiting for her at the mission was naive. Tambu reiterates her sense of the importance of her community when describing her family's misgivings about her attending Sacred Heart:

Don't forget, don't forget, don't forget... Always the same message. But why? If I forget them, my cousin, my mother, my friends, I may as well forget myself. And that of course could not happen. (188)

However, these words are ironic because although Tambu recognizes that remembering the past is vital, she has already proven to be adept at adapting her ideas and opinions to conform to her environment, and in the near future she will virtually lose her sense of identity and heritage at the convent and embrace their prescriptions and ideology. However, her position at the end of the novel seems to indicate that she has never been brain-washed, and that her ability to adapt to her circumstances without asking difficult questions is in fact a survival strategy. Questioning too much is fraught with danger, and it is partly for this reason that she neglects Nyasha in her time of desperate need as Nyasha questions unceasingly and ultimately comes to represent all the unanswerable contradictions in their situation. It is therefore easier to ignore Nyasha and immerse herself in the life at the convent, and this demonstrates how easily a breakdown in

Tambu's relationship with her community may occur. She admits to feeling a pang of guilt on receiving a particularly troubled letter from Nyasha, "But the pang of guilt was no more than a pang which dissolved quickly into the stream of novelty and discovery I had plunged into" (197).

Dangarembga also emphasizes the importance of the community for an individual's development by demonstrating how Tambu's involvement in the lives of others teaches her vitally important, painful lessons. Nyasha's breakdown demonstrates to Tambu in an extremely powerful way that ties with the community are vital for an individual to survive in oppressive circumstances, and causes her to begin re-evaluating her goals. Nyasha recognizes that she is deprived in this area and tries to re-establish her ties with the community through her intensive study of her people's history and culture. For example, she enjoys producing clay pots in prodigious quantities, but Tambu finds her fascination with them strange, as these pots are now considered impractical, and are hardly ever used since the advent of metal containers. Nyasha therefore displays an outsider's proprietary attitude towards her culture, and this incident demonstrates the extent of her alienation. Dangarembga's comments about Nyasha's alienation and isolation demonstrate her belief in the importance of having a sense of heritage and continuity with the community:

I think the problem of forgetting- remembering and forgetting- is really important. What is interesting is that Nyasha as an individual does not have anything to forget: she simply doesn't know... She obviously feels some great big gap inside her... (Wilkinson interview quoted in Androne 42).

Nyasha's relationship with Tambu is particularly essential for her, as it provides her with a degree of community and support that is otherwise completely lacking in her life. Once Tambu leaves, she is unable to sustain her solitary rebellion against the oppressive forces in her life. She writes of her loneliness and her need for solidarity to Tambu:

...the fact is that I am missing you and missing you badly. In many ways you are very important to me in bridging some of the gaps in my life, and now that you are away, I feel them again. (196)

This strongly demonstrates the importance of solidarity and community for individuals to survive in the face of oppression.

Like the protagonist of a "Bildungsroman", Tambu is involved in a process of defining her goals to achieve emancipation. Her initial belief in education as the means to achieve emancipation

becomes problematic, as various factors enable her to see that "...real emancipation means more than education and better economic standing" (Veit-Wild 333). She slowly comes to realize that her quest for education is fraught with contradictions:

[Tambu's] education and social advancement is at the same time a process of gradual emancipation and self-discovery. One of the aims of the story is to explore the contradictions inherent in the process. (Viet-Wild 332)

Nyasha's illness is critical in this regard, as it demonstrates to Tambu that gaining a Western education and developing her critical consciousness is not sufficient to ensure emancipation.

Tambu describes her distress and confusion after Nyasha's breakdown in the following way:

If Nyasha, who had everything, could not make it, where could I expect to go? I could not bear to think about it... if you asked me before it all began, I would have said it was impossible. I would have said it was impossible for people who had everything to suffer so extremely. (202)

"Everything" in this case refers to Nyasha's material comforts and extensive education, which Tambu has devoted most of her life to obtaining, as well as Nyasha's brilliant, independent mind. Maiguru's example also demonstrates to Tambu that education will not necessarily provide emancipation and independence, as Maiguru is trapped in her role of subservient, dutiful wife and mother. As a result Tambu slowly realizes that "...both educated and uneducated women can be trapped by gender and coloniality" (Creamer 353).

Nyasha's influence is vital for Tambu's intellectual development, as Nyasha encourages her to think critically and independently. Tambu describes the effect of her exposure to Nyasha's ceaseless questioning and unconventional ideas in the following way:

With Nyasha's various and exotic library to digest, with having to cope with her experimental disposition, her insistence on alternatives, her passion for transmuting the present into the possible; having to cope with all of this... I was far ahead of my peers in both general knowledge and general ability. (178)

This fact is recognized by the nuns who come to the mission to recruit promising scholars, and secures her a highly sought-after place at the prestigious Sacred Heart convent. Nyasha also advocates a humanistic approach towards social and economic problems, as she believes that through careful intellectual analysis of problems, solutions can be found:



She read a lot of books that were about real people, and peoples and their sufferings: the condition in South Africa which she asked Maiguru to compare with our own situation... the Arabs on the East Coast and the British on the west, about Nazis and Japanese and Hiroshima and Nagasaki... she said, you had to know the facts if you were ever to find the solutions. She was certain the solutions were there. (93)

However, in spite of her mental agility, Nyasha is unable to escape the contradictions of her situation. Her situation is particularly poignant as she is fully conscious of her inadequacies and of what is happening to her. Dangarembga explains to Petersen that "Her education enables her to see, to become conscious of it, but it doesn't really enable her to do anything about it" (346).

Dangarembga's subversion of the "Bildungsroman" genre continues as she demonstrates how Tambu's mother and aunt teach her important lessons. Tambu's mother protests violently about Tambu going to Sacred Heart, to the extent that she becomes acutely depressed and loses her will to live. This reaction is based on her fear that Tambu will forget her home and become alienated from her community like her brother Nhamo, whom Mainini describes as "bewitched" on his return home after a term at the mission (53). Mainini is able to accurately identify the danger to her loved ones as the powerful foreign influence in their lives, or "the Englishness": "It's the Englishness," she said. 'It'll kill them all if they aren't careful,...' I could see she considered me a victim too..." (202-3). Tambu is eventually able to recognize the wisdom of her mother's words, and by the end of the novel she is beginning to develop a sense of caution and wariness towards the English education system: "Although I was not aware of it then, no longer could I accept Sacred Heart and what it represented as a sunrise on my horizon" (203). This represents a radical revision of her thinking, as initially her mother represents the poverty and "burden of womanhood" she wishes to escape from.

From Lucia, Tambu learns that it is possible to achieve one's goals whilst being part of the community, and that it is foolish to attempt to leave one's former life behind. Lucia works within the limitations of her situation, and through a mixture of shrewdness and audacity she is able to achieve her goals. For example, her position as a woman in this society means that she must rely on men to achieve her goals, and so she allows men to believe they have power over her, a myth which her treatment of her ex-lover Takesure at the "dare" quickly destroys (Uwakweh 82).



Tambu recalls how she saw "...smiles slide over the patriarchy's faces,..." (144), as Lucia drags the pathetic, whining figure of Takesure to his feet by the ears! She rebels against society's prescribed role for her, and is branded as a whore as a result, but in fact she uses her sexuality cunningly to escape her circumstances.

Lucia has to depend on Babamukuru's generosity for a job at the mission, but once there she enthusiastically embraces the opportunity to begin her education, which will ultimately enable her to become economically independent and self-sufficient. In this way she achieves limited self-determination and emancipation. The limitations and irony of her situation are evident, however, in the fact that Lucia has to depend on Babamukuru's sense of duty as family patriarch to give her her job and thus help her achieve her goals. Tambu learns something from her aunt's survival strategies, as her remarks about attending Sacred Heart demonstrate a sense of self-preservation, as well as ambition and determination: "If you were clever, you slipped through any loophole you could find. I for one was going to take any opportunity that came my way. I was quite sure about that; I was very determined" (179). Lucia's approach may be compared to Nyasha's; whilst Nyasha refuses to accept her situation and attempts to change it through violent confrontation and rebellion, Lucia recognises the limitations of her situation, and has the maturity and determination to manipulate them to achieve her goals. Tambu is exposed to the outcome of both approaches and is therefore able to evaluate and learn from her family's experiences, and adapt her survival strategies accordingly.

Lucia's example also demonstrates the importance of female solidarity to Tambu, as her support, practical advice, and encouragement saves the lives of her sister and her young nephew (Uwakweh 83). When she arrives at the homestead to look after her sister, she embarks on "...a regime of what I can only call shock treatment." (185), which causes Mainini to take a renewed interest in life. This behaviour stands in sharp contrast to Tambu's thoughtless neglect of Nyasha when she becomes ill, and the similarity between these incidents is intended to emphasize the importance of community and female solidarity further.

By the end of the novel, Tambu has made significant progress towards her goal of becoming educated, but she has by no means resolved any of the confusion and distress the events

described in the novel and the enormous pressures she is subjected to have caused her. The ending of the novel is, however, the beginning of Tambu's adoption of a self-conscious and critical stance, from which she will be able to begin re-interpreting events:

Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to the point when I can set down this story. (204)

This lack of closure runs contradictory to the "Bildungsroman" in which the hero successfully reaches a higher state of consciousness by the end of the novel. The effect of this is to demonstrate how exceptionally difficult it is to find solutions in Tambu's situation. The solutions and conclusions she finds at a later date are only implied by the narrator's ironic and subtle retelling of events.

Dangarembga's novel also describes an unusually intense level of pain and suffering endured by characters during the process of emancipation, and this once again highlights the unusually stressful nature of this society. Tambu's closing words bear testimony to the painful nature of her continued development beyond the scope of the novel: "It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. It was a process whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume..." (204). In an interview with Petersen, Dangarembga raises the question whether gaining consciousness is necessary and constructive for individuals, because of the immense cost it entails, and this indicates her serious reservations regarding the value of Western education:

The question one could ask is should people really become conscious of a situation or should they not. I think that what is shown here is that consciousness always has a great individual cost. (Dangarembga's interview with Petersen 346)

However, the fact that the novel is open-ended has the effect of creating hope that the excruciating circumstances described may be transcended, because defining actions do not cease within the text, and significant choices and decisions may still be made (Androne 44). This is a further effect of the strategy of "writing beyond the ending" discussed in the introduction. The way in which she is ultimately able to retell her story indicates that she has gained full consciousness and acute insight into the situation which at the end of the novel is still confusing

and unclear to her. Tambu's story is therefore ultimately one of success and emancipation, although the completion of this process is not described in the novel.

The consciousness Tambu has gained by the end of the novel as a result of the events described in the novel will ultimately enable her, like Lucia, to use the educational opportunities available to her for her own ends, and reject the seductive "Englishness" of her colonial education. This rejection takes the form of writing this novel, which voices Tambu's independent point of view on many issues, but ironically this literary achievement is only possible because her colonial education along with her friendship with Nyasha has exposed her to many different ideas, and given her the ability to read and discover historical and cultural facts for herself. Dangarembga therefore illustrates that contrary to the beliefs of Ngugi and others, brain-washing is not a necessary consequence of exposure to the colonial education system, and that it is possible to question and ultimately reject the values it teaches.

The novel emphasizes that Tambu is ultimately able to achieve emancipation because other women in her life provide her with powerful examples and cause her to re-access her goals. Emancipation is therefore achieved as the result of the collaboration of various influences, including her education, but the novel strongly suggests that involvement in the community is the key to achieving a degree of personal and intellectual freedom. Dangarembga's portrayal of Tambu's quest for emancipation is therefore once again contradicts the pattern of a "Bildungsroman", as she demonstrates that Tambu's individual efforts nearly lead to disaster, and the novel is therefore not a success story, but one of near failure. Unlike the powerful, victorious figure which traditionally emerges at the end of a "Bildungsroman", Tambu emerges battered and bruised, with only a precarious sense of self and identity intact.

A similar reversal of the reader's expectations occurs in Bessie Head's Maru, when Margaret's developing artistic consciousness is almost destroyed and she suffers a minor breakdown, which is described by the author in the following agonizing terms: "Everything was unbalanced and broken. She slowly reeled homewards but it was no longer the earth and sky; only a still, cold, dead world with no sun" (Head 115). Head uses Margaret's "failure" to demonstrate the pervasive and powerful nature of racial discrimination in this society, which Margaret is

ultimately unable to endure. Similarly, Dangarembga's radical reversal of reader expectations emphasizes the socio-political factors which almost cause Tambu's downfall: rigid patriarchal prescriptions, her fear of economic hardship, and the powerful, destructive influence of the colonial education system. Dangarembga's strategy of subverting the familiar "Bildungsroman" formula is therefore ingeniously used to provide her with an opportunity to deliver powerful commentary on the stressful and oppressive circumstances in her society.

### **Conclusion: The Significance of Writing**

In her novel, Tsitsi Dangarembga has subverted familiar western styles and literary forms to present a particular point of view. Stratton uses Jameson's writings to explain that Dangarembga's text makes an ideological statement, as it is constructed by:

...the rewriting or reconstruction of a prior historical or ideological subtext. This transformation of the subtext comprises the symbolic act of the text. Literary texts are both aesthetic and ideological discourses: the aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary / formal solutions to unresolvable social contradictions. (79)

Dangarembga's subversion of existing subtexts is used to emphasise the destructive effects colonial and patriarchal oppression have had in her society, and to create an opportunity for her to deliver socio-political commentary. This novel can therefore be regarded as politically and socially significant. Numerous factors make the publication of novels by African women difficult, and the fact that the author has faced and overcome these difficulties is evidence of her commitment to her subject and her community.

Firstly, this novel is significant because Dangarembga has entered the ongoing debate surrounding the issue of gender in African literature and challenges the representation of African realities in books by African male authors, through her representation of female characters in her novel. Stratton claims that in this regard her novel follows a prevalent trend in African literature:

When African literary discourse is considered from the perspective of gender, it becomes evident that dialogic interaction between men's and women's writing is one of the defining features of the contemporary African literary tradition. (1)

This dialogue has come about due to the fact that African women writers have felt that they have been misrepresented and discriminated against in novels by many male authors, and therefore "...women writers have been engaged in a sexual, as well as a class / race struggle from the beginning" (Stratton 9). Boehmer emphasises the significance of novels, which speak out against inaccurate portrayals of women and the perpetuation of women's oppression:

...the first answer to these questions seems to lie in simply giving voice: women speaking for themselves, telling their own histories, countering the monologic with multi-vocality... Such vocalisations and rewordings, unsettling if only by virtue of their emergence, might in turn bring about shifts and changes in the canon of the nationalistic texts, the exploration of new generic forms, possibly new versions of 'traditions'. (224)

Dangarembga's novel is also inspired by an urgent need to counter the misrepresentation of African people in general by imperialist, colonial narratives. Nnaemeka describes this as the "...urgent necessity of rewriting history, of re-inscribing what the imperialistic subject has erased in its writing of hegemonic history" (151). Novels like Dangarembga's are important as they help bring about social change, by providing different perspectives on history and traditional women's roles.

Secondly, Dangarembga's novel is significant as it affirms the validity of women's perspectives and experiences, or in Doris Lessing's words, the fact that "...that filter which is a woman's way of looking at the world has just the same validity as that filter which is a man's way" (Quoted on the cover of *Nervous Conditions*). According to Uwakweh, women's perspectives in literature are important because "The female voice promises fresh insight on women's reality and experiences that are generally inaccessible to the male tradition" (76). The uniqueness of these insights is partly due to the fact that women writers have been marginalized, and this marginal position has afforded women a unique vantage point from which to deliver their commentary. Because of their former isolation they have also frequently not been assimilated by popular ideological trends. Nnaemeka describes this phenomenon in the following way: the African woman writer "...is simultaneously marginal and privileged; she is better equipped to describe the battle because she is on the sidelines" (154). Any solutions to Africa's social and political problems proposed by male authors will be ignoring a rich source of insight and commentary, if they fail to take cognisance of this unique female voice.

Like Dangarembga, many African women writers have used their unique position on the sidelines to describe the social and political phenomena in their countries, and it is hardly surprising that many of them have chosen to focus on the position of women:

In their works, black women writers have encoded oppression as a discursive dilemma, that is, their works have consistently raised the problem of black women's relationship to power and discourse. (Henderson 263)

Writing is therefore used as a means to create awareness about topical issues such as women's oppression in society, by illustrating the need for solidarity amongst women and by re-examining women's roles. For example, Dangarembga's novel emphasizes "...that women in particular can

develop the critical awareness, determination and strength to fight against oppression” (Veit-Wild 344), and this represents a significant revision of women’s traditional roles in society. In an interview with Petersen, Dangarembga explains her belief that solidarity amongst women is of vital importance, and her novel demonstrates how debilitating the lack of support and solidarity can be for Zimbabwean women:

...if [a woman had] solidarity outside her marriage, friends who encouraged her to use her potential, and if with the encouragement from these friends she did act, then she would start feeling better about herself and would probably be a better marriage partner, anyway. (347)

Emecheta demonstrates a similar belief in the importance of women’s solidarity in Nnu Egos’ words, in The Joys of Motherhood:

“...who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man’s world, which women will always help to build.” (Quoted in Bazin 186)

It is evident that African women’s writing has as important role to play in providing new solutions to Africa’s problems, and creating awareness and solidarity amongst women. At the same time, writing is significant for women writers as a means of achieving personal liberation in oppressive societies. The act of writing may serve as a public announcement of a woman writer’s independence and identity outside of her traditional roles, and the existence of her critical consciousness and unique ideas, and this may have a liberating effect. According to Uwakweh, “Voicing is self-defining, liberational, and cathartic. It proclaims an individual a conscious being capable of independent thought and action” (75). The affirmation of identity is particularly significant since women’s former subject status within dual systems of oppression has problematized and confused their sense of identity and self-worth. By writing, African women writers indicate that they have transcended these circumstances and the “silencing” imposed on them by their societies. Dangarembga’s text does not indicate that Tambu successfully resolves all of these issues, but this lack of resolution has not prevented her from adopting a critical stance and delivering commentary. The author uses the Tambu’s inability to find solutions during the course of the novel to illustrate the deeply debilitating effect colonialism and patriarchal oppression may have on women. By implication, Tambu’s ambiguous position after having received an education may also reflect the position of some of the educated women in Dangarembga’s society.



The fact that Tambu revisits events at a later stage and retells her story is extremely important for her personal development, as it provides her with an opportunity to analyze and reconstruct events in her own life. It is possible that Dangarembga also used the opportunity of writing this novel to analyse some of her experiences, as the events narrated are reminiscent of some of her own experiences: she also grew up as the daughter of parents who had been educated abroad, spent her early childhood years in Britain and received a Western education at an exclusive convent in Salisbury (Veit-Wild 331). Writing about the situation in one's own society may therefore have a powerful healing and cathartic effect for women writers, as the author is able to find new meaning and significance within her experiences at a later stage. In her novel *Cat's Eye* (1990), Margaret Atwood explores this theme of reconstructing and reinterpreting one's history through the act of artistic creation at a later stage. In the novel Elaine makes sense of her past in semi-autobiographical paintings, and this process culminates in an exhibition of her work which allows her to piece together the fragmented sections of her history in new and revealing ways. As a result she is able to understand the influence of her childhood experiences on her development and gain a more comprehensive understanding of herself.

Finally, the act of writing frequently signals rebellion against the status quo, because women are not encouraged to speak out or be heard in many African societies. Writers like Dangarembga describe a burning desire to speak out against the colonial and patriarchal systems which have silenced women's voices, and the prescriptive and oppressive roles for women these systems advocated. According to Nnaemeka the pressure of living in these societies is stifling and psychologically damaging to the extent that many women writers speak of writing or speaking out in terms of a necessary escape from insanity, or "nervous conditions". She quotes Emecheta in this regard: "I am just an ordinary writer, an ordinary writer who has to write, because if I didn't write I think I would be put in an asylum" (150). She also summarizes Mariama Ba's comments on the subject of insanity and liberation through writing:

...women have much to say, but they remain reticent about writing; this reticence, the unsaid, the unwritten, the silences eventually propel many women into the asylum. Within this context, she concludes, the liberating force of language remains a recurring motif in their writings. (151)

Dangarembga's need to be heard when writing Nervous Conditions is recorded in an interview with Petersen, but her words bear testimony to the fact that her writing is born out of more than a personal need for liberation and demonstrate a deep commitment to her society:

...one has to write about the things one feels strongly about, otherwise it doesn't work... I also felt that these things were larger than any one person's own tragedies or so forth but actually had a wider implication and origin and therefore were the things that needed to be told. (quoted in Wilkinson 190)

The complex and stressful situation Dangarembga finds herself in as a woman and a writer, contributes in a number of ways to the richness and vitality of her novel. Nnaemeka attributes the quality of works by writers like Dangarembga partly to the oppressive, enforced silence which must be broken if they are to be heard, and the fact that they have previously been silent: "...the heteroglossic nature of the unsaid / silences and the multivocality of the unsaid (when it becomes said) creates a new sense of tension and vibrancy in their works" (151). Critics like Nnaemeka and Henderson claim that negotiating between different versions of their many "selves" also creates this sense of multivocality. Nnaemeka explains this effect in the following way:

One discovers in these writers a kind of intrasubjective engagement with the intersubjective aspects of self, a dialectic neither repressing difference nor, for that matter, privileging identity, but rather expressing engagement with the social aspects of self ("the other[s] in ourselves"). It is this subjective plurality that, finally, allows the black woman to become an expressive site for a dialectics / dialogics of identity and difference. (264)

This thesis has discussed Dangarembga's engagement with existing literary conventions and the different ideologies which inform these conventions. Henderson claims that this engagement with various ideologies and traditions contributes to the universal appeal of novels like Dangarembga's:

The engagement of multiple others broadens the audience for black women's writing. If the ability to communicate accounts for the popularity of black woman writers, it also explains much of the controversy surrounding some of this writing... This literature speaks as much to the notion of commonality and universalism as it does to the sense of difference and diversity. (264)

One can conclude that an African women writer's position, although it is fraught with difficulties and challenges, has an extremely positive influence on the quality and relevance of the commentary her novels provide. It is partly because of her marginalized position that

Dangarembga can adapt and subvert existing literary forms and transform reader expectations with such ease, as she has been discriminated against and excluded from the privileged communities which gave birth to these conventions. It has been demonstrated that the purpose of this strategy is to highlight the powerful, destructive effects colonization and the patriarchal system have had on her society, and on Zimbabwean women in particular. Because of these oppressive systems, her novel demonstrates that it is virtually impossible to achieve and maintain the position of commentator and interpreter: firstly because this requires exposure to the colonial education system, which stifles students' critical development, and secondly because it involves rebelling against the prevailing patriarchal order. Many African woman writers of Dangarembga's generation have been subjected to extreme pressures, and have enjoyed little solidarity or support from their societies, a combination of factors which may be critically debilitating, as Nyasha's case demonstrates.

Dangarembga's sensitive and multifaceted approach when portraying these realities provides insight into the realities many African women experience on a daily basis. The fact that she makes a number of suggestions, but refuses to identify easy, facile ways to heal the scars of her nation, as the novel lacks closure and Tambu is unable to find definitive solutions, emphasizes the devastating effect the colonial and patriarchal systems working in conjunction have had on this society, and the complexity of the present social situation (Veit-Wild 334). Finally, the extent of her social commitment is evident in her willingness to break the silence imposed on African women and face the inevitable censure this brings, because of her conviction that these things "needed to be said". Because of this commitment she is able to deliver powerful, heartfelt social and political commentary in the novel, whilst at the same time she creates a memorable story of human endeavour and suffering.

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